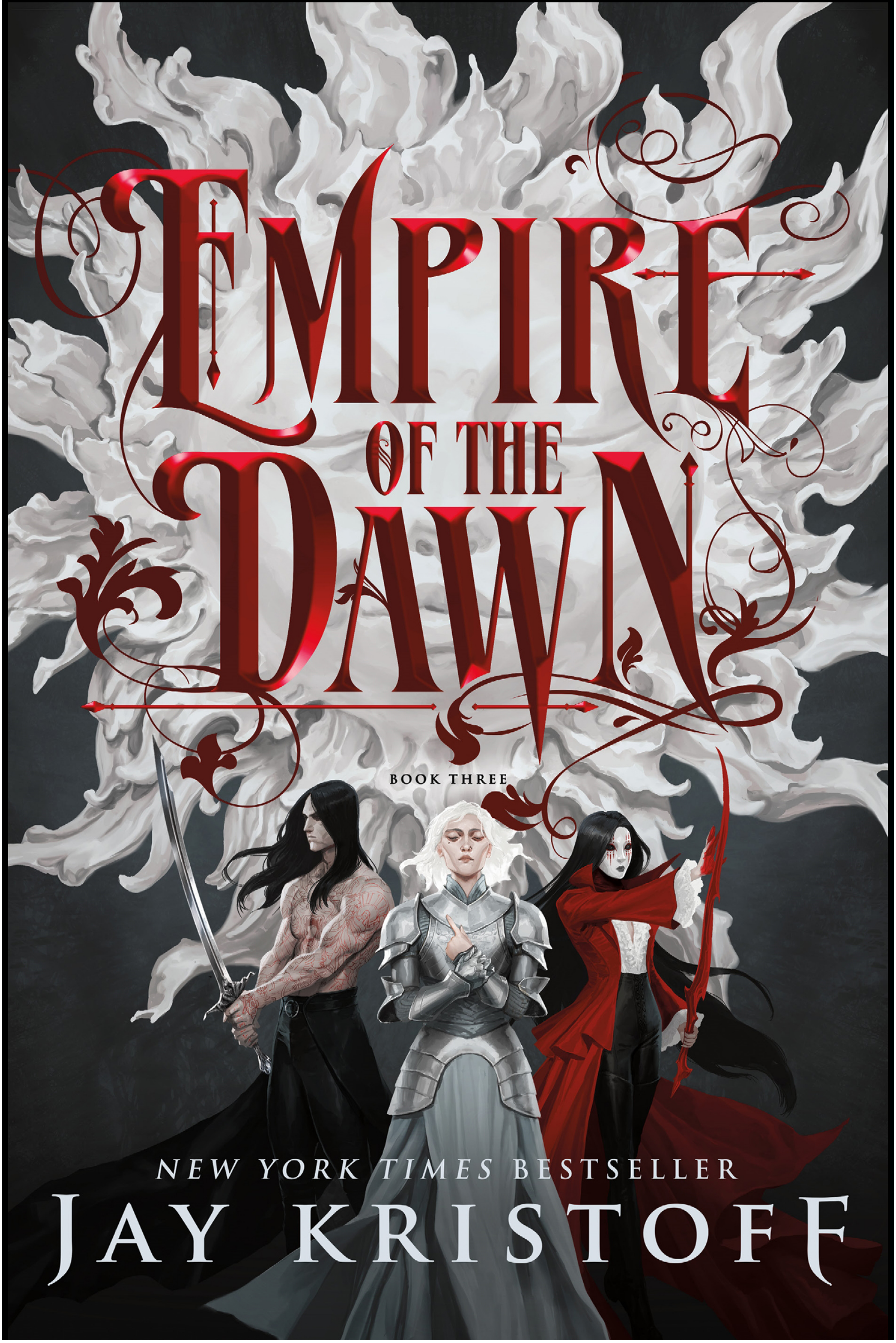
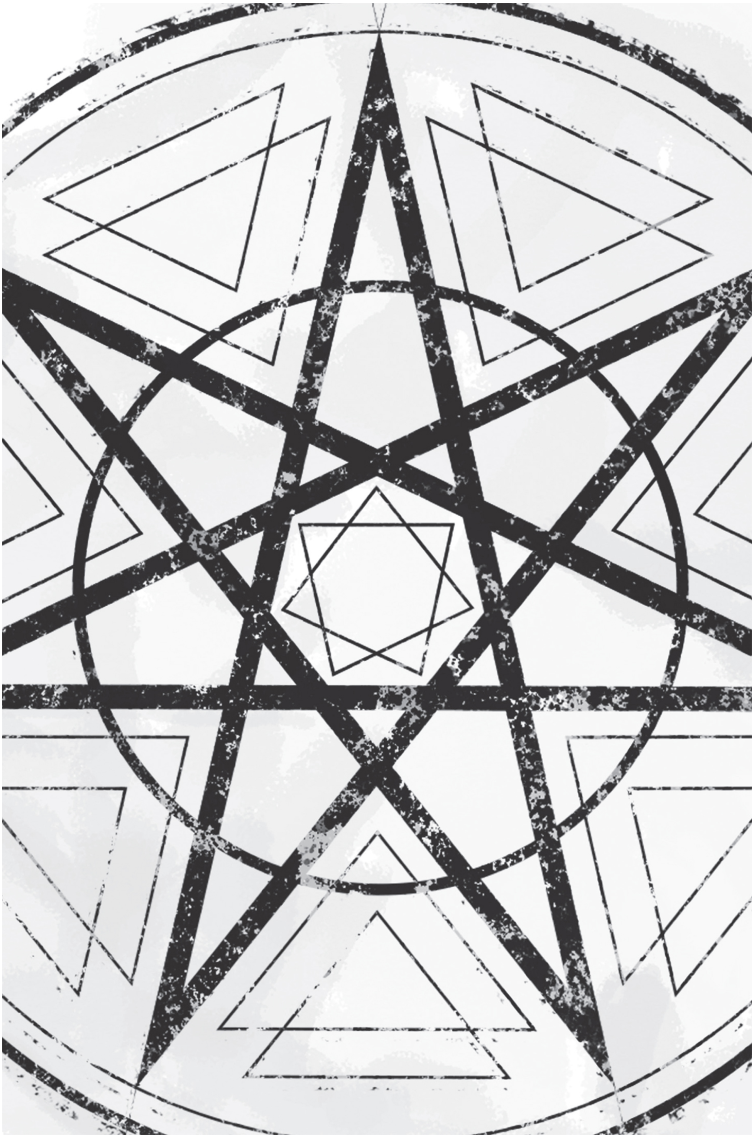


EMPIRE OF THE DAWN

BOOK THREE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

JAY KRISTOFF



EMPIRE
OF THE
DAWN

JAY KRISTOFF

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
GONZALO MENDIVERRY
ADDITIONAL DESIGN BY BON ORTHWICK

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

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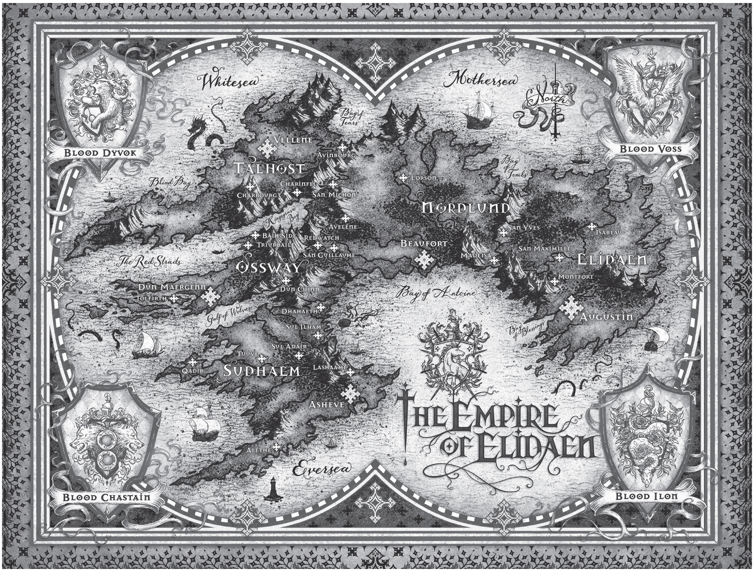
For Amanda
My Blood and Fire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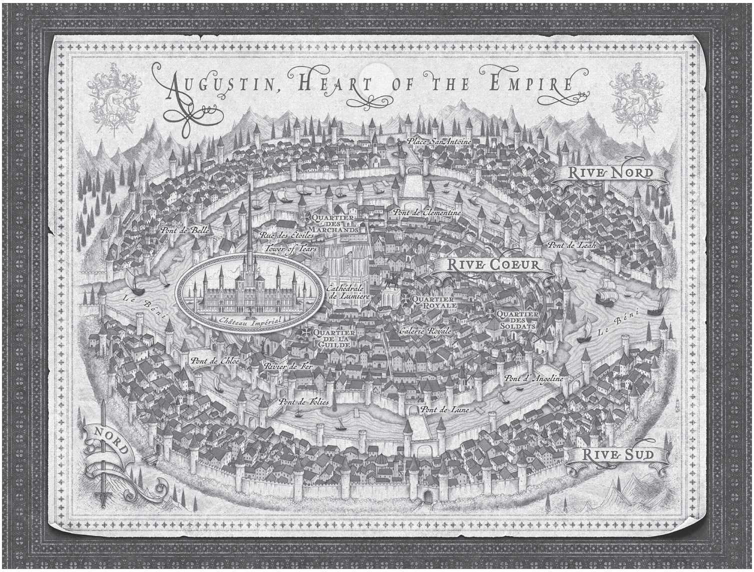
AUGUSTIN, HEART OF THE EMPIRE
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Pont de Folies
Pont de Lune
Nord
Rive Sud

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

TIME IS NO friend to mortals, dear reader, and who knows how many seasons have withered since last we spoke. Memory is an unreliable narrator at best, and at worst, a lying fiend. Having no fondness for either, your historian offers reminder of these, our players:

Gabriel de León—The Last Silversaint, the Black Lion of Lorson, and Sword of the Realm. Gabriel is a paleblood—born of a mortal mother and vampire father, inheritor of his sire's power and bloodlust both. Born nine years before the fall of daysdeath, when the sun was blotted from the sky across the Empire of Elidaen, Gabriel was recruited into the Silver Order of San Michon at fifteen years of age. He became a paragon of that holy brotherhood, knighted by the Empress herself, before falling into disgrace for the sake of love.

And here I sit, all out of violins.

More than a decade after his excommunication, Gabriel was a broken man, bent upon vengeance for the murder of his famille at the hands of the Forever King, Fabién Voss. But after meeting Dior Lachance, he instead devoted his life to the girl's protection, and came to care for her as dearly as his own lost daughter, Patience.

Seeking the truth about how Dior might end daysdeath, he was betrayed by his sister, Celene, and separated from Dior. Gabriel recruited an army of duskdancers from the Highlands of Ossway to wrest his holy charge back from the fiends who had captured her. But as is often the case with our so-called hero, tragedy awaited at the end of his road.

Delightfully consistent, is he not?

Dior Lachance—Daughter of a streetwalker, orphaned at eleven, Dior's life of petty larceny was interrupted by the discovery that her blood could heal any wound. Escaping execution for witchcraft at the hands of the Inquisition, she learned her power was no blessing of the Fallen, but a gift from heaven itself. Dior is the descendant of Esan; the daughter of God's own mortal son, the Redeemer.

Determined to fulfill her destiny by ending daysdeath, Dior fell into the keeping of Gabriel de León and his vampire sister, Celene. Pursued by children of the Forever King, she was instead captured by Nikita and Lilidh, eldest vampires of the Dyvok bloodline. Held in the cityfort of Maergenn, she learned her holy blood could break thralldom—the false love imposed by drinking from the same vampire three times over three nights.

Hatching a conspiracy with other mortals in the Dyvok court, Dior helped bring about the fall of their damned kingdom. At the last, she was slain by the ancien, Lilidh, her neck snapped clean before Gabriel could save her.

But in the sepulcher beneath Maergenn, three days after her death, Dior opened her eyes.

Celene Castia—Gabriel's half sister. At age fifteen, she was mutilated and murdered by Laure, youngest daughter of the Forever King, as revenge for her brother's actions. Sixteen years later, she re-entered Gabriel's life, calling herself *Liathe* and hunting Dior.

Though born of a Voss sire, Celene claimed membership of the mysterious Esani bloodline—the same line Gabriel's own father belonged to. Despite their mutual distrust, the siblings worked together for a time, seeking ancient vampires of the Esani and the secret of how Dior might end daysdeath. But fearing Gabriel's rising bloodlust made him a threat to Dior, Celene eventually betrayed and tried to murder her brother.

The pair reconciled to rescue Dior from the Dyvok. But upon learning Celene was both the pupil *and* murderer of his own father, Gabriel's mistrust was rekindled, and when he learned the Redeemer himself was responsible for the creation of the first vampires, Gabriel flew into a rage that allowed Lilidh the opportunity to murder Dior.

Three days later, Dior rose from the dead. But in the bowels of the crypts beneath the city, Celene witnessed another awakening—an ancient vampire of the Esani line named Maryn, who may hold the key to ending daysdeath forever.

Phoebe á Dúnnsair—Phoebe traveled with Dior in the guise of a lioness for months before revealing her true nature—she is a duskdancer, capable of shifting between human and animal forms with the setting of the sun.

Separated from Dior by Celene's treachery, Phoebe pursued the girl with Gabriel. During their journey, the pair discovered a bond in tragedy—Phoebe's own husband had been slain in war, and like Gabriel, she'd also lost her daughter. The duskdancer and silversaint became lovers, their explicitly detailed amorous escapades unlocking a riddle that united the Highland clans in purpose to rescue Dior.

During the final battle against the Untamed, Phoebe was reunited with her husband, Connor—now revealed as a thrall of Lilidh Dyvok, trapped in wolfen form.

But their reunion would be deliciously brief.

Connor á Lachlainn—a duskdancer of the Ossian Highlands, and descendant of their mightiest queen, Ailidh the Stormbringer. Connor wandered the Empire of Elidaen for years before returning to the Highlands and marrying the younger Phoebe. Though apparently slain in war by rival clans, Connor was actually captured by Lilidh Dyvok, his mystical blood used to empower her line's conquest of Ossway.

Connor wore the shape of a great white wolf during his servitude in the Dyvok court, but when his bond to Lilidh was broken, he viciously defended both the Grail and the Princess, Reyne á Maergenn, from Lilidh's claws.

Maddeningly, he was slain by the Contessa before explaining why.

Reyne á Maergenn—fifthborn daughter of the legendary Niamh Nineswords, Duchess of Ossway. Reyne's father was an unknown wanderer, taken as a lover by Niamh after the death of her husband. Reyne's bastard birth was a source of shame for her mother, and the lass was raised in Elidaen by her older sister, Yvaine, far from the Nineswords' court.

Returning years later to defend her homeland, Reyne was captured during Maergenn's fall to the Dyvok. Her thralldom was broken by Dior, and the pair helped free the rest of the Dyvok slaves, defeat their armies, and slay their eldest.

How they found time to become romantically entangled during all this boggles one's mind.

Teenagers, oui?

Astrid Rennier—Astrid was the bastard daughter of Emperor Alexandre III, shuffled off to the monastery of San Michon when her existence became inconvenient to Alexandre's new wife, Isabella. Forming a friendship with Gabriel that blossomed into romance, she was excommunicated with her lover when she fell pregnant.

Astrid gave birth to a daughter and married Gabriel. The pair retired to the southernmost reaches of the empire, there to live as a famille in quiet happiness.

You know the rest.

Patience de León—daughter of Gabriel and Astrid. Her father had her name tattooed in silver across his fingers when she was born—a reminder to the former silversaint about what was truly important in life. She was Gabriel's pride and joy, the very sun in his sky.

She was eleven years old when she was murdered by the Forever King, Fabién Voss.

And folk would name *me* monstrous.

Ashdrinker—Gabriel's enchanted sword, capable of speaking directly to the mind of her wielder. Despite not being made of silver, she is nonetheless a deadly bane to coldbloods, and she and Gabriel cut a swathe through the armies of the Dead in their days of glory.

Though she experiences moments of lucidity, Ashdrinker is often confused about where and even *when* she is—she has never been the same since her blade was broken on the skin of the Forever King. Exactly how Gabriel came to possess her is the topic of much speculation among minstrels, soothsingers, and pisshouse prophets of the empire.

And I for one would like some *bloody answers.*

Aaron de Coste—Aaron was the son of a baronne and a vampire of the Blood Ilon. He was apprenticed at San Michon with Gabriel, and their rivalry eventually blossomed into true friendship. He left the Order when his love for the smith, Baptiste Sa-Ismael, was discovered by their brethren.

Aaron and his beau settled in Château Aveléne, living an idyllic existence until Gabriel stumbled back into their lives more than a decade later. Subsequently, their home was destroyed by the Dyvok, and Aaron was slain by Kiara, daughter of Nikita, rising from death as a highblooded vampire. Taken to Nikita's court, Aaron was thralled to the ancien's service and became his lover, partaking in all manner of depravity in the Blackheart's bloody boudoir.

His mind was finally freed from Nikita's influence by his beloved Baptiste.

But who can speak to his heart?

Baptiste Sa-Ismael—a former blackthumb of the Silver Order, friend to Gabriel, and genius of the forge. Baptiste left the Order with Aaron after the discovery of their relationship, and was captured when their home was destroyed by the Dyvok years later.

Thralled to Kiara, Baptiste was freed from his servitude by Dior. Taking up arms against his captors, he fought valiantly in the battle of Dún Maergenn, standing side by side with Gabriel and his former brethren in the Silver Order. He struck the killing blow upon Nikita, releasing his dear Aaron from slavery and proving—even in coldest climes and darkest times—that love does indeed conquer all.

Yes, dear reader. That was sarcasm.

Chloe Sauvage—Sister of the Ordo Argent, and childhood friend to Gabriel and Astrid. Reunited with her old friend years after his excommunication, Chloe recruited Gabriel to help defend Dior Lachance. Driven by ancient prophecy, she intended to bring Dior to San Michon Monastery, where she believed daysdeath could be undone through a ritual unearthed in the library. When Gabriel learned said ritual involved Dior's sacrifice, he murdered Chloe and half a dozen other silversaints in the girl's defense.

Sœur Savage was doubtless a fanatic, but perhaps not *completely* insane: After the Battle of Dún Maergenn, a second half of Chloe's prophecy was discovered in a tomb beneath the city, which may indeed hold the secret to ending daysdeath forever.

Lachlan á Craeg—Gabriel's first and only apprentice in the Silver Order. Lachlan was the paleblood son of Tolyev, Priori of the Dyvok, his childhood spent in bloody servitude to his monstrous father. Captured at fifteen, Lachlan's eyes were opened to his family's brutality, and he was recruited by Gabriel into the Order. The pair became fierce friends—even upon discovery of Gabriel's affair with Astrid, Lachlan refused to betray his mentor.

Years later, the young 'saint learned of Gabriel's attack upon San Michon Cathedral while rescuing Dior. Mistaking the girl's hold over Gabriel for witchery, Lachlan hunted his former master across the empire, before finally becoming convinced of Dior's divinity. He mustered a band of silversaints to aid Gabriel at the Battle of Maergenn, and helped Baptiste slay his half brother, Nikita.

Yet the price for Lachlan's loyalty was steep—he was the only 'saint to survive the battle.

Joaquin Marenn—A houndboy from Aveléne, Joaquin was thralled to Kiara Dyvok after the destruction of his home. Freed from servitude by Dior, Joaquin remained in Maergenn, determined to rescue his beloved—an Ossian lass named Isla á Cuinn.

Though Isla proved a traitor, Joaquin was instrumental in the final battle, helping Dior free the Dyvok thralls and rallying them to fight in the Grail's defense.

Brynne á Killaech—A duskdancer of the Highlands, of that breed known as úrfuil, or bear-kin. Like most of her kinfolk, Brynne has been irrevocably altered by the Time of Blighted Blood, and retains many animalistic features even when in human form.

She is a fierce warrior, and fought bravely at the Battle of Dún Maergenn.

Fabién Voss—The Forever King, and Priori of Blood Voss. Fabién was the first ancien to weaponize the wretched—a mindless breed of vampire that became abundant after daysdeath—mustering them into a vast army known as the Endless Legion. Fabién has since conquered much of the empire, his sights set upon the capital, Augustin.

He murdered Gabriel's famille, and since learning of her existence, has obsessively sent his children to capture Dior for some unknown end. Gabriel discovered Fabién was once capitaine of the Knights of the Blood—vampire warriors who destroyed the Esani line at the battle of Charbourg centuries ago. But in a tomb beneath Maergenn, a far more chilling discovery awaited the Last Silversaint about his nemesis: Fabién was one of five mortal priests responsible for the Redeemer's murder, cursed by God's son to a life of undeath.

One of the first five vampires to walk the earth.

Danton Voss—The Beast of Vellene, Fabién's youngest son, and one of the seven Princes of Forever. He was killed by Dior, wielding the enchanted blade Ashdrinker, which had been anointed with her holy blood.

Laure Voss—The Wraith in Red, Fabién's youngest daughter, and dam of Celene Castia. She was slain by Gabriel at the Battle of the Twins.

Alba and Aléne Voss—The Terrors, Fabién's eldest children. Sent to claim Dior from the Dyvok at Dún Maergenn, they were instead slain themselves—Alba was killed by Gabriel in single combat, and Celene drank her Aunt Aléne to ashes.

Nikita Dyvok—The Blackheart, Priori of Blood Dyvok. Utilizing the corrupted blood of duskdancers to enhance the already terrifying strength of his line, Nikita fueled an invasion of Ossway, reducing that once mighty nation to a charnel house. He enslaved Aaron de Coste, and was in negotiations to hand Dior Lachance over to his former lover, Fabién, but was slain in the Battle of Maergenn by Baptiste Sa-Ismael.

Lilidh Dyvok—The Heartless, the Winterwife, eldest of the Dyvok line. More cunning than her warrior brother, it was Lilidh who discovered the magiks of duskdancer blood, and questioned the true purpose behind Fabién's pursuit of Dior. She was destroyed in the battle of Dún Maergenn, but not before snapping Dior's neck and killing Phoebe's husband, Connor. She is survived by her child, the Draigann, now eldest of the Dyvok line.

How low the mighty have fallen.

Illia—Former Priori of the Esani bloodline, and founder of their faith. It was rumored she was a dark sorceress in life, but after becoming a vampire, Illia found religion in the form of the One Faith, devoting her unlife to support of the Redeemer's bloodline.

She was murdered during a cataclysmic battle in the city of Charbourg, led by her great enemy, Fabién Voss.

Maryn—The Mother of Monsters, and now Priori of the Esani. The Esani bloodline were all but extinguished at Charbourg, reduced to only four in number. To safeguard their survival, the remaining Esani scattered across the empire, watching in secret for any sign that the Redeemer's line may have survived that terrible night.

Only a child in stature, Maryn is the eldest surviving member of the Faithless. She was entombed beneath Dún Maergenn in a slumber known as eventide, waiting more than a century for her turn to keep watch for the Grail's birth. She bears countless souls within her body—stolen in a cannibalistic act the Faithless named communion.

Who knows what they whisper to her in the dark?

Jènoah—One of the four surviving Esani. He was master of a grim keep named Cairnhaem, hidden deep within the Nightstone Mountains. Gabriel, Celene, and Dior traveled to his lair seeking his wisdom, only to discover the ancien had taken his own life. In a chapel atop his silent château, the trio found his final words scrawled in his own blood upon the floor.

"*This wait too long. This weight too heavy. Father, forgive me.*"

Wulfric—Gabriel's father, and warrior of the Esani line. Little is known of him, save he dwelled for a time in León, where he was lover to Gabriel's mother, Auriél. Abandoning his lover when she fell pregnant, Wulfric had naught to do with Gabriel's upbringing, though he returned briefly at Auriél's call when their son fell ill.

After her Becoming, Celene tracked Wulfric to his home in San Yves. There, she became his pupil before consuming him, claiming his power and all the souls he carried for herself.

Why, is the damned question.

Alexandre de Augustin III—Emperor of Elidaen, Defender of the One Faith, and Protector of the Realm, Alexandre has ruled from the Golden Halls of power in Augustin since he was seventeen. Now a man in his late sixties, it is rumored much of the burden of his crown falls upon the brow of his beloved (and far younger) bride.

Isabella de Augustin—Wife to Alexandre III, and Empress of Elidaen. She was a patron of the Ordo Argent, and knighted Gabriel after the Battle of the Twins. Isabella used the young Black Lion as her right hand in subsequent years, overseeing his rise to fame.

Maximille de Augustin—A warrior king who began the unification of five warring countries into the great Elidaeni Empire, more than six centuries ago. Maximille was killed before his dream came to fruition, but his descendants sit upon his Fivefold Throne to this day. The Church named Maximille the Seventh Holy Martyr as reward for his earthly efforts.

Michon—The First Martyr, a simple huntress who became a disciple of the Redeemer, and carried on his holy war after his execution upon the wheel. Unbeknownst to most, Michon was also the Redeemer's lover, and together, they had a daughter named Esan—a name meaning Faith in the tongue of Old Talhost.

Esan—Daughter of Michon and the Redeemer. Four centuries ago, Esan's descendants raised rebellion against the Augustin Dynasty; an uprising that became known as the Aavsenct Heresy. Though supported from the shadows by Illia and her merry cult of cannibals, their rebellion was crushed by crusaders of the One Faith. Their capital of Charbourg was sacked, and most of their number slaughtered.

Dior Lachance is last scion of their line.

Blood Voss—The vampire lineage descended from Fabién, who call themselves the Ironhearts. They possess a superhuman resilience to physical harm, and their eldest can also read and speak to minds.

Blood Dyvok—Spawn of dread Tolyev, also called the Untamed. All vampires possess extraordinary strength, but the youngest Dyvok can put even elders of other lines to shame. Their ancien can dominate folk with the power of their voice—an ability called the Whip.

Blood Ilon—The Whispers, a brood descended from great Ilon. Far subtler than the Dyvok, Ilon can manipulate emotions with a single word, and their eldest can bring entire ballrooms to rapture or terror with only a glance—a gift they call the Push.

Blood Chastain—The descendants of Empress Margot, also named the Shepherds. Chastain control beasts of earth and sky, and take their many forms—the older they are, the more forms a Chastain may assume. Shepherds are also uncannily quick, and their eldest can seem as the wind when they move.

Blood Esani—The Faithless. A heretical cult of cannibals and sorcerers who can manipulate blood through the dark arte known as sanguimancy. The less said of them, the better.

Palebloods—Half-human children born of vampire fathers. They possess weaker versions of their fathers' supernatural gifts, but also inherit their bloodlust; a curse called the sangirè or red thirst. This affliction can be kept in check for years by the narcotic known as sanctus. But eventually, it reduces all palebloods to bloodthirsty animals.

And now, mes amis, we end.

From holy cup comes holy light;
The faithful hand sets world aright.
And in the Seven Martyrs' sight,
Mere man shall end this endless night.
Before the Five, come unto one,
With sainted blade, 'neath virgin sun,
By sacred blood, or else by none;
This blackened veil shall be undone.

—Author unknown

SUNSET

I

IT WAS THE twenty-seventh year of daysdeath in the realm of the Forever King, and his murderer was still waiting to die.

The killer stood again at a thin window, watching his finale arrive. Tattooed hands were clasped at his back, stained with blood, both fresh and merely remembered. His room stood high in the reaches of his lonely tower, battered by a tempest just as sleepless as he. His door remained locked like a secret. His heart, locked tighter still.

From his vantage, the killer studied the procession below, his eyes the grey of the storm above. The figures wending toward the gatehouse were few, antlike; tiny black spots crawling on a plain of frost. But their coming was a portent, shaking the stones beneath him like no earthly thunder could, and their arrival told him that his departure was not too distant now. That this game, like all good things, must soon see its end.

The château was awake, the deathless who called it home arrayed in their finest to impress the newcomers. Thrall soldiers in dark steel stood the battlements, twin wolves and twin moons emblazoned on black cloaks. All along the ringed ramparts, burning braziers licked the freezing air, tongues brighter than the failing sunset. Within the innermost bailey, among her bloodless court, an Empress of Wolves and Men awaited her guests. A pale historian lurked beside her, chocolat eyes drifting to the killer overhead.

The sky above was dark as sin.

The horizon, red as his lady's lips the last time he kissed her.

The killer ran one thumb across his fingers, the letters inked below his knuckles.

"Patience," he whispered.

II

THE GATES OF Sul Adair opened with the song of splintering ice, the groan of frozen hinges.

The Marquis Jean-François, historian of the Blood Chastain, stood at his Empress's right hand, watching the great portcullis rise like an executioner's blade. Three more had opened in sequence before it, clearing the path through four baileys, encircled by mighty ramparts of black ironstone. Gears rimed with ice crackled and moaned, razor-sharp winds whipping flurries of grey snow up the long, cobbled road to the outer walls. Watching the tiny figures approaching from its far end, the Marquis felt his lower lip curl.

Frost clung to his lashes, golden hair whipping about his face in the bitterbleak gale. His flailing curls were an annoyance—he'd have commanded his majordomo, Meline, to bind them back properly had he the time, but he'd been roused before sunset by one of his mother's minions, pounding on his boudoir door as if all hell had come calling. Jean-François had lifted his head from his bloody feast between Meline's thighs and snarled at the interruption, but with sparse apology, a thrall boy in his Empress's livery had informed the Marquis his presence was required in the bailey *immediately*. Jean-François barely had time to wipe his chin before the bells began to sing, signaling the approach of guests most honored. Slipping on some dark silken finery and an embroidered frockcoat mantled with hawk feathers, he'd hurried downstairs, cursing the lack of decorum in it all.

Not for two more nights were these carrion eaters set to darken their doorstep, but thankfully, their early arrival had not thrown Margot's court into *much* disarray. By the time the visitors reached the outer walls, a small army of courtiers had assembled upon the grand steps leading to the château, gathered around their eldest in a wall of crimson silk and black fur and pale brocade. Empress Margot herself was arrayed as befitting royalty; a stunning gown of golden velvet and midnight lace, her greying hair bound back in bejeweled braids, her four great black wolves sat in a row before her. She'd been a slight woman of middle age when she Became, but long centuries had bestowed Margot Chastain a grandeur that dwarfed all around her. Her flesh was purest marble, her face a bloodless mask, eyes black as hell watching the portcullis finally fall still.

Standing dutifully at Margot's side in the falling snow, the Marquis studied the dozen figures trudging beneath the gatehouse arches, borne by a motley of thralled horses. Reaching out to the beasts with the gifts of his blood, Jean-François could sense their exhaustion—whipped through seven sleepless days and nights to get here.

Glancing sidelong at his maker, Jean-François idly wondered if his Empress had bid her servants wash her feet this morning.

They were about to be kissed by royalty, after all.

Bringing his steaming horse to a halt, the lead rider climbed from his steed, snow crunching as his boots struck the flagstones. A greatsword near twice the length of a man was strapped to his saddle, the hilt adorned with roaring bears. His companions dismounted as the leader drew back his hood, cold gaze roaming the thralls on the snow-clad battlements, the storm raging above. He was tall, nowhere near burly, though glancing at that terrible blade, Jean-François was under no illusions about the strength coiled within his wiry frame. His hair was long and snow grey, his beard likesame, encrusted with frost and whipping in the wind. His ice-pale skin had the leathered look of a man who'd sailed long years beneath a harsh sun before he Became, the faded tattoo of a bare-breasted maid with a fish's tail wound up one side of his throat. And as he spoke, Jean-François caught the glint of golden fangs in the vampire's upper gums.

"Margot Chastain of the Blood Chastain, eldest of her line, and Priori of the Shepherds." The vampire inclined his head slightly. "I bid you greetings, cousin."

"Draigann Dyvok of the Blood Dyvok, firstborn broodchild of Lilidh, and now Priori of the Untamed." Margot smiled, almost imperceptible. "We bid thee welcome, cousin."

"We thank you kindly for your invitation, Lady Chastain, and for y—"

"Empress."

The vampire named Draigann faltered as Margot spoke.

"*Empress* Chastain," she said, her smile warming slightly.

Thunder rocked the skies as the Draigann glanced to the kith he'd arrived with. They were a small band, as bedraggled as the steeds they'd rode in on. A youngish brute clad in a travel-stained cloak of children's skin—from the recountings of the silversaint and his sister, Jean-François knew this one's name was Rémille. A pretty woman in the robes of a holy sister; a burly thug with a moustache long enough to hang its owner; a wizened crone, toothless save for the canines gleaming in her black gums; a scattering of half a dozen others. The sigil of bears rampant on broken shields adorned their gear—a belt buckle here, a pommel there. These were escapees from the attack on Dún Maergenn, the remnants of a shattered court, the last dregs of a line once mighty.

Pitiful, Jean-François mused.

The Draigann's gaze returned to Margot.

"Your reputation precedes you, cousin. And I am aware we are guests in your home, so I choose my words carefully. But though Margot is Empress of both wolves and men, me and mine are neither. We are the blood of mighty Tolyev. The Blood of Dyvok. We are Untamed, Lady Chastain. And we kneel for none."

Displeasure rippled through the assembled courtiers, narrowed eyes and muttered threats. But Margot herself only smiled the gentler.

"Time shall tell."

She reached out to the closest wolf, a hulking brute named Fealty. The beast lifted its chin, reveling as the Empress's claws skimmed its fur. Her gaze never left the Draigann.

"We were cleaved to our heart to hear of thy mother's murder. Great fondness was harbored in our breast for Contessa Lilidh." Margot's smile dimmed slightly. "Her brother Nikita, less so. Yet still, the destruction of a Priori is no trifling affair. Our condolences, cousin, on the loss of thine eldest, the fall of thy capital, the ruin of thy line."

The Dyvok rankled, but none were foolish enough to rise to Margot's bait.

"We thank you for your kindness, cousin." The Draigann clenched his jaw. "And for opportunity to mete justice upon he who so stained himself with the blood of Dyvok."

Margot blinked, black eyes gleaming. "Justice?"

"In your invitation … you made mention you had captured the dog who slew mighty Tolyev at Crimson Glade. Who led the assault on Dún Maergenn. Who murdered a *score* of my kin, my own *dam* among them." The Draigann glanced around the deathless courtiers, a hint of gravel in his tone as his golden fangs flashed. "Do you have the keeping of Gabriel de León? Or have we trekked to this forsaken hovel for naught?"

"You forget yourself, Dyvok."

Jean-François's eyes drifted to the speaker, gathered among the kith at Margot's left hand. A woman, tall and buxom, long blond hair woven into a gold-threaded wreath around her brow, the velvet of her gown spilling to the floor in a crimson flood. She held a tiny ball of pale fluff beneath one arm—a dog barely worthy of the name.

"This *forsaken hovel* is the most impregnable fortress in all Elidaen," she declared. "And this Empress you refuse to kneel before is the eldest kith yet walking this earth. If not allegiance, at the very least you owe great Margot respec—"

"Viscontessa."

Margot's gaze had not left the Dyvok, but her cool tone cut the younger vampire's lecture in half. Jean-François smiled as the Viscontessa bowed, falling silent as tombs.

"We hath the Black Lion's keeping," Empress Margot said, smiling once more at the Draigann. "Thanks to the ingenuity of our talkative granddaughter, Nicolette, here. But not for some tawdry display of mortal justice hath we invited thee to our home."

The Draigann scowled, but held his tongue.

"These wars betwixt our kind and the sheep hath drained this empire white as yesteryear snows," Margot continued. "Upstart bloodlords carve petty fiefdoms and feud for the dregs that remain. Foulbloods maraud unchecked, swelling their rotting number further every night. And he who styled himself our Forever King is slain. But if our great houses do not come to accord, soon we shall *all* join Fabién on the shores of hell. And I for one harbor no burning desire to suffer my due judgment in the Houses of the Fallen."

The Draigann clenched his jaw.

"Nor I, Lady Chastain."

"Then be at peace, cousin. Only a century or two hath ye walked this earth with deathless feet, but thy dam was ancien true, and know ye full well, the sanctity of Courtesy offered by the eldest. Thee and thine are welcome here in Sul Adair. Honored guests, one and all. We have news 'pon the winds that Kariim the Spider draws near, and the Iron Maiden shall arrive by Damesday. Once the Priori of Ilon and Voss are seated beside thee at mine table, we shall all of us decide how this new night shall be ruled."

Margot smiled, cold as winter's kiss.

"And who shall kneel for whom."

The Draigann pressed his lips thin behind his frozen beard, but with a swift glance to his motley court, this beggar king slowly nodded.

"You speak truth, cousin. Not misplaced are rumors of the wisdom of the Priori Chastain. But on one matter, I must regretfully dissent."

"Prithee, cool thy blood, Priori. Thy vengeance shall have its slaking, doubt it not. Slender entertainment doth the Black Lion of Lorson yet provide, but soon shall Gabriel de León's cup runneth dry. We shall allow thee witness as his throat is cut in the end."

"I thank you, Lady." The Draigann actually dropped into a decent sort of bow at that, his courtiers following likesame. "And well will we savor the punishment due. Yet not on the matter of de León do I dissent, but your estimation of your other guests."

Margot blinked. "Indeed?"

"Perhaps these storms have grounded your eyes, cousin. But they've not slowed the Ironhearts. If you expected their coming by weeksend, you underestimated their resolve to see their maker avenged. We caught sight of them on the road here, and I tell you truly: Kestrel and her court will be knocking on your door well before Damesday."

Margot's face remained impassive, and she nodded once, as if news of the Ironhearts' early arrival held no more heft than a feather. But throwing a hateful glance to the tempest above, Jean-François knew full well the weight of this revelation.

"Come ye," Margot said, gesturing to the ironbound doors of the grand keep behind. “Parched ye must be after so long a journey. Enter and be welcome, children of Dyvok. And know no fear. The Blood Chastain shall see thy thirsts *well* satisfied.”

The Untamed cohort bowed once more, Margot’s courtiers parting like black water, thralls scurrying forth into the falling snows to take charge of their beasts. But the Dyvok themselves waited politely—not wholly an unruly mob, these sons and daughters of Lilidh. The Draigann inclined his head, gesturing to the keep.

“After you, great Lady.”

“So rare to find a gentleman in these sunless days. But ye must forgive us, Priori. Matters of state demand our brief attentions. Certain are we, thou art familiar with how heavy the mantle of eldest can weigh. Even ’pon shoulders as impressive as thine own.”

The Draigann nodded. “I will await your pleasure within, Lady.”

The Empress smiled, dark as poison. “Not long.”

Margot glanced to the once-talkative Viscontessa at her left hand.

“Show our honored guests to the dining hall, Nicolette. We shall join thee presently.”

With a curt nod and a swish of red velvet, Nicolette climbed the snow-clad stairs, leading the Dyvok through towering doors wrought with warring angels. Margot’s courtiers followed, a procession of venomous whispers and eyes like knives. Jean-François remained at his Empress’s side, eyes roaming the keep’s façade; the magnificent tree-tall windows of stained glass, the flying buttresses, the spires piercing the dusk-deep skies.

Though he’d dwelled here for a decade, the Marquis was still slightly awed at the scale of this place. Viscontessa Nicolette had spoken true: Sul Adair—*Black Tower* in the tongue of Sūdhaem—was the realm’s mightiest fortress now great Augustin was fallen. At least a dozen different armies had broken like cheap pottery upon these walls over the centuries, and the mighty mont upon which it was built was known as Akhiv Dha Th’oth—*the Mountain that Drinks Soldiers*. Once this fortress had guarded the goldglass mines of Lashaame and Raa, the grand cityport of Asheve, but now the—

“For what dost thou wait, child?”

Jean-François blinked, turning to his Empress. Margot was stood in the falling snow, a full head shorter than he, yet somehow towering above. Kith could not choose which of their victims were granted the Gift, and Jean-François knew many in Sul Adair whispered his dark mother spoiled her youngest son. But gazing at him now, Margot’s presence was a chill bleaker than any storm, her eyes as dark as the oubliettes beneath this keep. The fires struggling upon the battlements threw long shadows on the ground, and as Margot stared at him, they seemed to deepen, to *bend,* the dark between them rippling and warping as her gaze drank him like a desert drinks the rain.

“Mother? What—”

“We are blinded in this tempest. But if this fool just spake truth, Kestrel Voss may be but a few turnings of the moons from our doorstep. Though this Draigann is a beggar in a king’s guise, no paupered orphan be the Iron Maiden. Kestrel is eldest of the Ironhearts, battle-bloodied, and a true Prince of Forever. And she is *close,* my son.”

Jean-François glanced to the tower window above, jaw clenched. He could sense storm-grey eyes upon him, remember those fingers around his throat, hand drifting up to his cravat and caressing the still-healing wounds beneath. Thunder cracked the skies.

“De León,” he said.

“And his sister. There is more to their tale, Marquis. The army of the Moonsthrone, the fall of Dún Maergenn, the discovery of dread Maryn beneath, all these songs have they sung. But the red snows of Augustin, the Battle of Charbourg, the fate of the Grail…”

“They are *liars,* Mother,” the Marquis hissed. “Since the first night we spoke, de León has repeated his claim: *The cup is broken. The Grail is gone.* He *wept* testifying to Lachance’s murder at Lilidh’s hands. Yet not one hour later, his sister confessed the Grail soon awoke in the tomb where they buried her, alive and well.”

“Then her *breaking* must be yet to come in his tale.” Margot lowered her chin, black gaze boring into his. “And I would have the rest of it.”

“The Last Silversaint and Last Liathe are serpents, filled with the same rank venom. Their fondness for deceit is equaled only by their hatred for each other.”

“Then *use* it, Jean-François.”

The shadows warped further, a faint screaming rising behind the roar of the wind as the Empress Chastain took one step closer to her youngest.

“The Iron Maiden and the Spider draw near. The haste of their approach speaketh volumes to the prick of their desire. But still, we need *advantage* if we expect them to bend the knee, and de León and his wretched sister hold it. For what purpose did the Forever King covet Dior Lachance, Jean-François? Why did Fabién seek the child alive? And if indeed she *was* the key to ending the death of days, how is it the sun still wears its ashen mantle, and dawn yet dons cold midnight’s crown?”

Margot fell silent, black gaze pressing on the Marquis until it was all he could do not to fall to his knees. But as thunder tore the skies, she reached out, too swift for mortal eyes to follow, hand resting upon his flawless cheek.

“De León still feels a kinship with thee, my pale beauty. His pride in himself and his hatred for his sibling shall provide the rest. *Use* him, Jean-François. Promise him the earth. Only claim me that which I need. The truths at the root of the Grail’s fall, the failure of the Faithless, the breaking of our Lion’s wretched heart.”

The Empress pressed gentle upon the Marquis's skin. But a chill trickled down his spine as he felt her fingers skimming his wounded throat.

"But do it *swiftly,* child."

Jean-François swallowed, nodding slow.

"As my Empress commands."

Margot's hand fell like dead leaves. Thunder in her wake, she ascended the stairs, her wolves trailing behind, leaving the Marquis in the falling snow alone.

Jean-François's hand drifted up to his neck.

His eyes to the figure watching above.

And jaw set, the vampire stalked inside.

III

HE WAS HALFWAY up the tower stair when the bloodscent struck him.

Not an uncommon perfume in a keep full of monsters, granted, and so keen were Jean-François's senses, he could smell the feast now underway in the dining hall. Beneath the thunder outside and Margot's choir within, the murmur of silken voices could be heard, coupled with snatches of distant laughter. The copper-sweet bouquet of fresh blood had tugged the historian downward even as he'd climbed, and he'd glanced over his shoulder to Meline, ever three steps behind. He saw his majordomo's lips curl at remembrance of his interrupted feast earlier this afternoon. Despite the cadre of thrallswords following, the Marquis was entertaining the notion of just rucking up Meline's skirts and finishing what he'd started right there on the stairwell when he smelled it drifting from the tower above.

Iron-bright.

Lead-heavy.

"Dario," Jean-François realized.

Meline bristled at the name, her lips pressed into a pout. Jean-François could still recall his majordomo's jealousy as the lad was presented to him by Viscontessa Nicolette. Dario hadn't been a gift freely given, of course—Empress Margot had been displeased at the Viscontessa's conduct during her recent expedition in Talhost, and Nicolette expected a kind word in Margot's ear in exchange for the boy. But Nicolette was Jean-François's niece by blood, and Dario was so beautiful, the Marquis hadn't been able to summon will to refuse. Yet now, he wondered how much of his newest thrall might be left.

Lions were rarely merciful to their victims.

Soundless as cats, the historian climbed the remaining stairs and opened the cell door. A figure stood at the window, hands at his back, smeared with fresh blood. Looking to the fireplace, Jean-François saw the source, crumpled on the hearthstone. A handsome beau in his fresh twenties, dark hair splayed across ashen cheeks, blood congealing on the twin punctures in his throat.

Jean-François drifted to the hearth, standing over the fallen thrall. The lad looked a corpse, yet by the featherlight drum of his pulse the vampire could tell …

"You didn't kill him."

The figure tensed at the Marquis's voice, but did not deign to turn.

"Of course I didn't."

"I wouldn't have minded."

The figure glowered over his shoulder then. "Of course you wouldn't."

Jean-François found his lips curling at the sight of the Lion enraged. Dark leathers hugging his powerful frame, hair spilling down his back in ink-black waves, shovelblade jaw dusted with stubble. Two scars cut down his right cheek, like twin teardrops. His eyes were the grey of the ocean before a tempest, his skin the shade of an empire's ashes, and upon the sumptuous curve of his lip was smudged the dark and delicious stain of sin.

Gabriel de León.

Last of the Silversaints.

Sweet Mothermaid, what Jean-François wouldn't give to—

"Should I fetch help, Marquis?"

Jean-François glanced to the doorway, the leader of his thrallsword cadre standing on the threshold beside Meline. Capitaine Delphine was a mountainous man, dark beard shaved to a point, widow's peak slicked back from a heavy brow. Warrior's eyes were fixed on the silversaint, hand on his blade. But de León had already turned back to the storm.

"A moment, Capitaine," the Marquis replied. "Merci."

Jean-François lifted wrist to mouth, biting deep. Blood welled forth, viscous and slow; the passions of his bed already cooled in his veins. But as Jean-François knelt and pressed his wrist to the fallen thrall's mouth, the lad's eyes flashed open at once. Pupils dilating to pinpricks, the thrall seized hold and drank, covetous, *starving,* the power of the Marquis's blood dragging him back from the cold dark he'd tumbled into.

Or more accurately, had been *left in* after the silversaint had his way.

Jean-François's gaze drifted to Gabriel, the iron-heavy scent of blood now hanging between them. The Marquis could feel Dario's pulse thundering as he drank, delighting in this sweet subjugation—both of the young man lying beneath him, and the older man standing before him, steadfastly staring out the window and pretending not to listen.

"Easy, love," Jean-François whispered, smoothing back Dario's hair. "You shall make a husk of me. And I have work to do this night."

The thrall ignored him, greedy, groaning, drinking still.

"*Enough,*" Jean-François hissed, snatching back his wrist.

Dario blinked, bewildered, like a newborn awaking from a dream. As his bleary gaze fell on the silversaint at the window, the young Nordling suppressed a shiver. But looking up into Jean-François's eyes, his blood-slicked lips curled in a lover's smile.

"Master," he breathed.

"Hush now, sweetling. Master is here and all shall be well." Jean-François glanced to the thrallsword capitaine. "Take him to my bedchamber, Delphine. See him watered and fed. No duties this day. My brave young beau has earned his rest."

The capitaine nodded to two of his blades, the soldiers stepping to the hearth and helping Dario rise. The boy still seemed weak as a fresh foal—Gabriel's hungers may not have ended him, but by the look he'd come perilously close.

Meline watched as Dario was carried from the room. Scowling, she placed fresh goblets on the round table, a new bottle of Monét and a glowing globe of chymical light between them. Setting a large leatherbound tome on one of the plush armchairs, she turned to Jean-François, fingers laced before her like a prioress at prayer.

"Do you desire anything else, Master?"

"I'm uncertain." Jean-François plucked a laced cuff down over his bloody wrist, eyes on the figure at the window. "*Do* we desire anything else, Gabriel?"

"Goddamn you," the silversaint hissed. "Straight to hell."

"I believe he shall oblige you there. If I am ever foolish enough to die." Jean-François glanced to Meline, smiling faint. "See that Dario is comfortable, my love. But return swift thereafter. I shall have want of you, before this night is through."

Jean-François looked to the figure by the window, ruby lips quirked.

"We both may."

Meline's breath came swifter, pulse quickening along the pale plane of her throat. With a deep curtsey and a swift glance to the silversaint's bloodstained hands, she slipped from the room. Jean-François noted the click of the lock, the soft pulses of Delphine's cadre lurking outside. And in a blink of preternatural speed, he sat himself in one of the antique chairs, that leatherbound tome now resting in his lap.

"Will you sit?" Jean-François slipped a wooden case from his coat, a gold-tipped quill within. "Or are you too wracked with guilt to allow yourself a moment's comfort?"

Gabriel de León made no reply, his eyes yet fixed beyond the glass.

"Know no shame at your hungers, Gabriel. Like all in heaven above and earth below, they are the will of God." Jean-François drew a bottle of ink from his coat pocket, unstopped its cork. "And made as you are in his image, your sickness is but a shadow of his own, mon ami. For there are none of us so bloodthirsty as the sovereign of heaven himself."

"On that score, vampire, we're in complete agreement."

“Come then. My Empress desires her finale. Sit with me and speak. Indulge no guilt at the hurts you bestowed the boy. I’ve no doubt the little slattern enjoyed it.” Jean-François smiled, dark as poison. “He certainly relishes the pains *I* bestow.”

“Fucking monsters. All of you.”

“Oui. But a monster can no more change his nature than a man.”

Their eyes met then, storm grey and dark chocolat.

“You pay the beast his due,” Jean-François smiled.

Gabriel sighed. “Or he takes his due from you.”

Jean-François watched, eyes like heavy-lidded coals, as the Last Silversaint turned from the window and eased himself down into the chair. There was a grace to Gabriel de León, undeniable; not so timeless as Margot, but rippling with ferocity and vitality, thrumming with life and heat. A warrior’s hands, a hunter’s eyes, fixed now on his as he reached for the bottle of Monét and plucked the cork with tattooed fingers.

“The Dyvok are here.”

Jean-François opened his history, smoothed down a fresh page. “And so?”

“So your Empress is running out of time.”

“Time is meaningless to the timeless, Gabriel.”

“I’d heard rumors. Margot was calling for Conclave even before the Battle of Augustin. A gathering of Priorem, to decide the fate of the realm.” The silversaint filled one goblet to the brim, staining the air with its dark perfume. “Was that the Draigann I spied down there? Slim pickings for royalty among the Untamed these nights. How did your Empress draw him here? Promise of my throat as vengeance for Maergenn? It’s going to get messy when the Voss start crowing for the same.”

“Hardly your concern, mon ami.”

“Oui. It’s *yours*. Because if all the leeches I’ve pissed off over the years are about to start queuing outside your Empress’s door for the pleasure of ending me, her hourglass has run out. Margot wants the history of the Grail. But you’ve only kept me talking this long through threat of starvation. And you’ve not got time for that anymore.”

Thunder shook the walls as Jean-François ran his quill over his smile.

“We can devise other tortures, Silversaint. Far swifter in their meting, and *far* more pointed. But the promises my Empress made to draw these flies to her web are irrelevant. This may shock you, Gabriel, but Margot *has* been known to lie on occasion. If your tale pleases her, there is no reason you could not live out your life as her honored guest.” Dark eyes roamed the silversaint, head to heel. “Think of it. To dwell here in Sul Adair, paying blissful homage to darkest gods, to know the pleasures of s—”

“Cut the shit, vampire. You and I both know I’m a dead man. Even if Margot deigned to spare my life, it *has* me. It *owns* me.”

The Last Silversaint leaned forward into the light, and beyond the storm grey of his eyes, Jean-François could see a glint of it; the debt come due for all those years of blood and sin in the arms of his bride. The curse. The madness that awaited every paleblood alive.

"Sangirè," Jean-François murmured.

"The red thirst." With haunted gaze, the silversaint looked to the hearth where he'd left Dario, twisting his shaking hands together. "That boy … Seven Martyrs, it was all I could do to stop myself. And one day soon … I won't be able to anymore. The sangirè will claim my mind, and the hunger will rule my heart. Nothing left but the beast. There's no life of pleasure awaiting at the end of my road, Chastain. There's insanity. And depravity. I've spent my whole life killing monsters. And I'll be *damned* if I allow myself to die as one."

Snatching up the goblet, Gabriel drained it in one gulp.

"I'd rather you fed me to the fucking Dyvok."

"That would be a shame." The Marquis's gaze roamed tattooed hands, bloodstained lips up, up to the silversaint's eyes. "A far more glorious end might someone else grant you."

"We don't always get what we want, Historian."

"You still may. If you told me your desire."

The Last Silversaint stared for what seemed an age of the earth. The hymn of distant thunder rang outside the window, the chymical globe glittered in his eyes as he set aside his goblet, and a kaleidoscope of dead butterflies took to the wing in Jean-François's belly as Gabriel leaned in, so close the vampire could taste the wine on his whisper.

"Celene."

Jean-François blinked. "What of her?"

"I want to watch the light die in her eyes," Gabriel growled. "I want to see her terror as she falls into the hell awaiting her. I want to watch that treacherous sow *die,* Chastain."

"Tsk, tsk. Such rancor."

Gabriel leaned back, fangs glinting in his bitter smile as he filled his goblet.

"It took a *lot* of love to hate her the way I do."

"One wonders what the Last Liathe did to earn that hate."

"I'll bet one does. And that story will cost you. The rest of my tale. Dior's. The Battle of Augustin. The bloodbath at the Charbourg. The final betrayal. I'll give you your damned history, Jean-François. But you give me my sister's throat."

Their eyes met, monster and man, over a brimming goblet of gold.

"I believe that can be arranged, Gabriel."

The Last Silversaint slowly nodded. Eyes drifting back to that chymical globe. A pale moth had emerged from some dark corner of the cell, beating its wings upon the glass. Gabriel watched its courses, battering in vain upon that glowing arc, lost in false starlight.

“Are you thirsty, coldblood? I fear it’s going to be a *long* night.”

Jean-François dipped his quill, expectant. “I have patience.”

The silversaint chuckled, but his smile died as swift as it had begun. “I did too, once.”

He sighed, running one thumb over his knuckles.

“I did too.”

BOOK ONE

DEATHSEEKER

And behold, oh children, by his Father’s word was the Son made flesh, and all the Empyrean choir were filled with boundless joy. To his Mothermaid did the angels of the host give great homage, and to her sacred child, each presented treasure of their own hands’ making. From Evangeline came Temperance, and Eirene, Hope, and great Raphael bestowed Wisdom, that the Redeemer might rule justly over the kingdoms of this earth. But that His enemies would fear Him, grim Mahné gave the infant dominion over Death, and Sanael, the secrets of the Blood, and Gabriel, the Fire that would burn the pathway to His throne.

And Heaven’s King was pleased.

—The Book of the Redeemer 2:39

I

PARTING GIFTS

“CELENE TOLD YOU I didn’t stay for Dior’s funeral.”

“Oui.” Jean-François raised a slender hand in warning. “But before you launch into another bout of mawkish grief, I feel it only fair to warn you that your sister *also* let slip that Lachance was not actually slain in the Battle of Dún Maergenn. That three short days after she had been interred within the Tomb of the Mothermaid, the Holy Grail of San Michon opened her babe-blue eyes once more. So save your tears for the troubadours.”

“Three days.” Gabriel shook his head. “Might well have been a fucking lifetime.”

“You were not made aware of this recovery in timely fashion, I take it?”

“I was long gone by then.”

“How convenient.”

The silversaint’s gaze sharpened at that, armrest creaking as he squeezed.

“There was nothing *convenient* about it, you soulless prick. I thought she was *dead*. Do you understand that? Almighty *fucking* God, when I think about the hell I went through, the *agony* of believing that girl was gone, that I’d failed her like my daughter, like my wife, like *every other soul* on this *godforsaken earth I have EVER LOVED*—”

“Calm yourself, Gabriel.”

The silversaint was standing, hands knotted into fists. Jean-François could hear the man’s heart galloping in his chest, the scent of blood and iron in the air. The historian sat with legs crossed, trying to appear serene. But the shadow of Gabriel's attack on the first night they'd spoken hung between them, and Jean-François still bore the scars on his skin.

"Delphine waits just outside that door with a cadre of thralled steel." Jean-François waved vaguely with his quill. "And should you give me occasion to summon him, I fear he will not be gentle with you." The historian leaned in, whispering in conspiratorial fashion. "Heavens know why, but our good capitaine does not regard you fondly."

Gabriel dragged his rage to heel, breathing deep and sinking back into his chair. He took another long gulp of wine, lips twisting.

"Well, that's heartbreaking news."

"I cannot begin to imagine your grief." Jean-François matched Gabriel's smile, rolling chocolat eyes. "But on other matters heartbreaking, how is it revelation of the Grail's miraculous resurrection did not reach you? You could not have got far before she dragged her spritely little corpse from her grave?"

"I'd tell you to ask Celene. See if the lies she spits to you match the ones she hissed to me. But never let the same snake bite you twice, vampire." Gabriel shrugged. "I suppose it doesn't matter in the end. At the time, all I knew was a girl I'd promised to protect had been murdered right in front of me. And on my account. Just like my Patience."

The silversaint ran one thumb over the name inked on his fingers.

"You know, it's one thing to fail your beloved. Another thing entire to fail your child. You'd not understand the depth of it, being what you are. But when you decide to bring a life into this world, there's a promise comes along with that. Deep as it goes. I felt it in my bones, the moment I first held Patience in my arms."

Gabriel shook his head in wonder, whispering.

"God, she was *so* tiny. I was terrified I'd break her. Refused when Astrid tried to hand her to me. But my wife understood. She knew me better than I knew myself. And when she pushed that warm little bundle into my arms, I felt the terror in me just … melt. Boiled molten and hardened into a steel of such resolve it could cleave the earth asunder. It helps to hate the things you fight. But it's *far* better to love the things you defend. And looking down into my baby's eyes, I knew there was nothing I'd not do to keep her safe.

"*Nothing.*

"I'd promised the same to Dior. That I'd fight my way back from the abyss to stand at her side. I'd not understood how much I'd needed it at the time. The hole inside me that girl had begun to fill. But in the miles and trials we'd shared together, Dior Lachance had come to mean as much to me as that baby girl I'd once held in my arms."

Gabriel shook his head, breathing deep.

"And I'd failed them both.

"I told her good-bye. Stole into the cold chamber where we'd laid her the night before her funeral. It was the deep dead past the witching hour, hungry winds howling through Maergenn's ruins, the chaos of battle replaced by the bitter knowledge of the price we'd all paid to win it. Aaron was off with Baptiste, trying to find some spark of their love among the ashes. Lachlan was somewhere near the bottom of a bottle—the last survivor of the silver contingent he'd brought to Dior's aid, seeking solace in the dregs. Phoebe was with her kin, weeping over the corpse of a husband lost and found and lost again."

"And Celene?"

"Fuck Celene."

Gabriel snarled, dragging tattooed knuckles across his lips.

"She'd known the whole *fucking* time. The Redeemer. His curse. The son of the God she worshipped had brought this hell down on all of us, and still she was content to sink to her knees before him. She'd stabbed me in the back. Lied to my face. About my father. The Esani. And in the end, she'd cost me Dior. My sister could burn in hell for all I cared.

"I stood in that cold room, looking down on that poor child, the wounds she'd carved into my cheek burning with my tears. Her long pale hair was arrayed about her head like a halo, and she was clad in a suit of beautiful platemail, gleaming in the dull light. Yet her left hand had been intentionally left bare, still ragged and torn—all save her forefinger and thumb torn away in the battle that had claimed her life.

"The whole world was a storm, and I was untethered without her. No hope of bringing back the sun. No thought of a better tomorrow. Left at the last with the only thing that had remained after the night *he* knocked on my door.

"*Vengeance.*

"I burned with the want of it; the only fire left to warm me now. And stripping the greatcoat off a dead silver brother, I climbed onto my horse and charged into the wailing winds. Vowing to that poor girl that if I did nothing else before I met the hell I'd so truly earned, I'd see Fabién Voss die before my eyes. Avenge this world he'd destroyed. And with that promise, and the parting gifts Dior gave to me, I rode out to end the Forever King."

Jean-François frowned. "Parting gifts?"

Gabriel only shook his head, a glaze coming over his eyes. He stared into the chymical globe, the ghosts of the past flickering in the glow.

"I rode northeast through the endless night, following the Òrd River, a plan forming slow in my head. Winter's worst would be over soon—both a blessing and a curse. Since daysdeath, spring, summer, and autumn lasted barely three months entwined, but no vampire can cross fresh running water save at bridges or in coffins. The coming thaw meant my pace would soon be slower, but also that the Endless Legion must soon halt its march.

"Fabién's army was somewhere in northern Elidaen, his eye ever on

Augustin. But with luck, the great châteaux defending the capital's northern reaches had held another winter, and the Forever King would have to retreat and await the next freeze.

"Await *me.*

"I'd only two real comforts on that road, but both warmed me more than thoughts of coming spring. The first was my steed, brave Argent; a gift from my old friend Fionna in Redwatch. The big gelding had seen me safe through the cursed Daesweald, the frozen Highlands, all the way to the walls of Maergenn town. He was that noble Ossian breed known as a *tarreun,* famed for their strength and endurance. Most of his shaggy coat was grey, with a faint luster that put me in mind of metal—the reason for his name, I supposed. But he'd white forelegs, and a pattern of the same about his face that looked almost like a skull. He ran relentless, miles through the rolling snows without pause, as steady a rock beneath me as any man could wish for.

"My second comfort was strapped to Argent's saddle, glinting silver in the boundless dark—my faithful blade, Ashdrinker. She'd been in my hand as I'd carved a bloody swathe across Maergenn, slaying wretched and highblood alike. But I'd sheathed her as I stumbled down into the tomb where I'd seen Dior meet her end, and I'd not mustered courage enough to draw her since. I knew Ash loved me true, but she'd loved Dior too—the pair had slain Danton Voss together, after all. Though she could only speak when wielded, she must have *seen* all that transpired between Celene and me in those final moments before Lilidh…"

Gabriel swallowed hard, shaking his head.

"I've told you before there's no friend like an honest one, coldblood. But truth is the sharpest knife. And I feared how deep Ash might cut me when I finally drew her again.

"It took me two nights to find nerve for it. My days were dim as dusk, and my dusks dark as midnight, the strangled sun limping overhead as I rode ever northward. I'd passed through this country years back when I fought in the Ossian campaigns, but I was still shaken by how deep the rot ran in them now. Acres of dead trees, thick with ice and strangled with fungus. Freezing winds howling over ruined farmlands. Grey snows reeking of brimstone, far as the eye could see. No birdsong. No warmth. No hope.

"I'd bedded down in a broken watchtower; little more than a circlet of crumbling stone, a rotting wooden roof to keep off the snow. I finished my after-dinner pipe of sanctus, the sacrament settling in my veins and calming the thirst within me. And sitting by the flames, I laid Ashdrinker in my lap. My eyes roamed the dame on the hilt, hair sculpted in long silver waves, arms outstretched on the crossbar. And breathing deep, I slowly dragged my sword from her sheath.

"But in my head, all I heard was silence.

"'… Ash?' I whispered.

"Her blade was long and curved in Old Talhosti style, arcane glyphs gleaming down her length in the firelight, six inches snapped from her tip. I studied that silvered dame on the hilt, face frozen in her forever smile, angelic and serene.

"'Ashdrinker?'

"*U-U-U-UUUUUNHAND ME, V-V-V-VILLAIN!*

"The voice in my mind was less a song and more a *scream,* crashing so sudden and loud that I almost dropped her. Both hands closing around the smooth leather of her haft, I winced and waited for the echoes to fall quiet in my skull.

"'Sweet fucking Mothermaid, Ash, there's no need to—'

"*LOATHSOME WRETCH! F-F-F-FAITHLESS DOG! STAIN NOT M-M-MMY HILT WITH THY SINNER'S T-TOUCH, N-N-N-N-NOR MINE EARS WITH THY GODLESS AFFRONTERY! SHAME UPON THEE, POXLET, TO UTTER SUCH FOUL B-B-BLASPHEMIES!*

"'Thought you'd be used to it by now.'

"*UNHAND M-M-ME, WHORESON!*

"'See here, Ash, I'm sorry, bu—'

"*COXCOMB! CH-CHURL! B-B-BASEBORN BASTARD OF A B-B-BEDSWERVING—*

"'Look, stop fucking SCREAMING *AT ME, WILL YOU*?'

"Argent snorted, looking up from his feed as my roar rang on broken walls. My blade fell silent, the dame on its hilt smiling, yet somehow managing to glower all the same.

"I sighed then, dragging one hand down my face and hissing as my thumb brushed the wounds there. Squinting into the dark steel of Ash's blade, I could see them dimly reflected—a pair of ragged gouges, torn by the bones of Dior's poor mangled hand. Days later, they were yet unhealed, cut deep beneath my right eye and trailing down my cheek. They almost looked like tears, shed over the girl who'd gifted them to me."

"And still they endure."

The silversaint looked up, Jean-François tapping his smooth cheek with his quill. Gabriel's hand lifted reflexively, brushing the scars beneath his right eye.

"Palebloods heal all but the deadliest wounds, de León. Just as kith do. Very little leaves us marred. You did not think it strange the wounds Lachance gave you lingered?"

"Oui." Gabriel shrugged. "But I'd seen her blood burn vampires to ashes before. I was half vampire too, after all. Honestly, I was too sick with her loss to fret on it much. Looking at my reflection in Ash's blade that night, I figured I deserved a little pain.

"'You've every right to be angry with me, Ashdrinker,' I told her. 'I know I failed you. Failed *her*. But since the day I first took you up, you've stayed faithful t—'

"*Speak n-notnotnot of faith to me! Ye sully my hilt with th-th-thy thieving hands!*

"'… I'm no thief.'

"*Mumblecrusted goatsnatcher, how came ye then to w-wieldw-wield me? Where b-be my righteous master? O, hapless fool, if harm ye hath bestowed him, the heavenly host itself shall avert their gaze from the hell I rain uponponponponthee!*

"'Ash, *I'm* your master. Your *friend*.'

"*Fie, I say! Fie and t-t-treachery, to snatch me from those handshands into which was I entrusted! P-pig-swiving loitersack, thou art ununununworthy!*

"My heart sank in my chest then, certainty dawning. Ever since the night she'd broken on the Forever King's skin, Ashdrinker had never been quite the same. Her mind drifted, her words stuttered, she sometimes lost sense of where or even *when* she was. But never before had it reached the point where …

"*Sully me no more with thy sty-sticky paws and return me to the hand of my m-m-master! I shall be NEEDED in battle to c-come! RETURN ME, I SAY!*

"Her voice fell silent as I thrust her back into her scabbard, loosed my grip on her hilt. I don't think I've ever felt more alone than I did at that moment. No matter my failings, the darkest hours of my life had been lightened by the weight of that blade in my hand.

"And now …

"*Sweet Mothermaid, she didn't even remember who I was.*

"I wondered at the whys of it. At what had changed between us. But in past nights when Ash lost her sense of time, she'd ever found her way back to the present. To me. Hoping her memories would return with the frail light of dawn, I set her aside with a kiss to her silver brow. And curling up slow by the fire, I went in search of sleep."

Jean-François dipped his quill. "Rather foolish, no? Self-loathing aside? Trekking the wilds of Elidaen with none to watch your back was invitation for peril, oui?"

"Not like I'd much choice." Gabriel shrugged. "But in my estimation, I was safe enough. Nikita's campaign through Ossway had left nothing living in its wake, and I'd know if any Dead were coming long before they reached me."

"How?"

Gabriel ran one fingertip over the silver designs atop his hands—a wreath of skulls on his right, a weave of roses on his left. The historian knew those tattoos covered most of the man's body—at least, the parts Gabriel had been kind enough to show him.

"The aegis of the silversaint," Jean-François murmured.

"The ink would burn in the presence of evil, bright enough to blind it. A boon no earthly armor could match." Gabriel shrugged. "And besides, Argent would serve as a beacon almost as bright as the silver on my skin. Beasts of earth and sky loathe your kind, vampire. Your scent, your very *presence,* puts them on edge. And so, content that I was safe enough, I drifted into slumber, hoping I'd not remember my dreams."

Gabriel took a gulp of wine, scowling.

"But still, she haunted them. The bond between us writ red in my veins. Her blood twice drunk now, once at San Michon when she'd saved my life, again at Cairnhaem when she'd tried to take it. I found Celene waiting for me beyond the wall of sleep; a figure in rippling crimson. She stood before me on the walls of Dún Maergenn, Aléne Voss withering in her arms. And as she lifted her bloody mouth from that Forever Prince's throat, my sister smiled with a naked jaw brimming with razor-sharp teeth.

"*'By thissss blood shall we have life eternal.'*

"I woke at that hiss, reaching for my blade. But blinking about the cold gloom, I remembered where I was. The fire had died, the storm quiet outside, the scent of sulfur falling with the new snow. Peering through the window of my crumbling tower, I listened to the whispering wind, the creak of ancient stonework around me, and beneath it all, soft as baby's breath, the faint crunch of frost beneath swiftly running feet.

"Argent snorted, stomping on the cold stone floor. I came fully awake, belly chilled with the knowledge I wasn't alone. But though my steed was out of sorts, my aegis was yet unlit, so I was certain whatever approached through that dark was no vampire."

The Last Silversaint chuckled, twirling his goblet between clever fingers.

"You can imagine my surprise when the fucker burst through the window and tried to take off my head."

II

HEROES

"THE FUCKER?" JEAN-FRANÇOIS glanced up from his tome. "Was that a title or occupation?"

"Neither. It was a foulblood. A woman, mid-forty when she died, maybe four days decomposed before she became a vampire. Her flesh was bloated, rot taken root in her brain and at her mouth, open to reveal two razored fangs. I roared as she crashed through the window and into my chest, dragging Ashdrinker from her sheath as I fell, crying out as that silver scream rang near fucking *deafening* in my head.

"*UNHAND ME ILL-BRED RUMPHERDING TALLOWCATCHER—*

"I crashed into the floor, breath knocked out of me, the shock of Ashdrinker's scream loosing my grip. She flew from my fingers as the wretched lunged for my throat, rot-ridden breath making my eyes water as it *hissed*. I punched it in the face, and it shrieked as the silver on my skin singed its flesh. Its fingertips dug into my throat, my wrist, and like a viper it struck, sinking those filthy fangs into my forearm and biting *hard*.

"With a bellow, I tore myself loose, blood glittering as it sprayed across the room. Argent bucked as it splashed his hide, straining now at his tethers. I rolled across cold flagstones, that deadthing grasping, flailing, hissing, wild at the taste of my blood. But though I'd lost Ashdrinker, I wasn't yet unarmed—my fingers closing about the wretched's throat as I reached down deep and dragged up the dread power within me.

"All palebloods are both blessed and cursed by our fathers, vampire.

Afflicted by the thirst that eventually drives us mad, but bearers of their boons also; strength, speed, and a touch of the gifts in the blood of their line. Mastery of beasts for sons of Chastain. Strength unholy for boys born of Dyvok. The warping of emotions for the Ilon. And for me, a blessing from the father I'd never known. The unholy arte of the Faithless."

"Sanguimancy," Jean-François said.

Gabriel nodded. "Mastery of the blood itself. My power was only a shadow of my father's. A mere droplet, born of an ocean. But as my fingers dug into that thing's neck, I summoned that unholy power, rippling up and out through my fingertips and setting that monster's blood boiling in its rotten fucking veins.

"It screamed; enough of its mind left to acknowledge the dreadful pain. I slammed its head back into the stone, intent on ending it swift. And so I would've, had the next two not come bursting through the tower door.

"A boy and girl, not much older than Dior, and like enough to be kin. They crashed into me, my grip ripped from the shrieking woman's neck, blood spraying, bone cracking. I kicked the boy aside, the girl lunging at my throat. And with cold fear slicing my belly, I found myself looking the Angel of Death in the eyes."

"Battling *foulbloods*?" The historian scoffed. "Please, de León. Your attempt at early drama is appreciated, but you can hardly expect me to believe you feared for your life."

"Spoken like one who's never had to fight for it. Rotten or no, wretched are still *vampires,* Chastain. Swifter than the fastest deer, strong as half a dozen ordinary men. And oui, I wasn't ordinary. But it'd been hours since the sacrament I'd smoked with supper, and though the pisshouse minstrels sing I was the greatest swordsman ever born, my sword lay on the stone where she'd fallen. Barehanded, hungry, three against one?"

Gabriel shook his head.

"Like I told you, the graveyards of the world are full of fools who thought of fear as anything but a friend. You bet your arse I was afraid, Chastain.

"It was Argent who gave me the room to move, the big warhorse finally breaking loose from where I'd bound him, delivering a crushing kick to the boything looming over me. The coldblood crashed back into the wall, and with a cry, I seized the girl's wrist and slung her after her fellow. Her body struck the stonework, rotten mortar and bricks spinning into the night as the pair burst clean through. But my victory was short-lived; the ancient tower around me shivering, that wall rippling like the sea in a storm as the integrity of the structure finally gave way and the whole shithouse collapsed around my ears.

"Argent was fast enough to escape the downfall, and I managed to fling myself clear of the worst of it, leaping out through the wall as the roof came crashing down. But I still felt brickwork raining on my back, my fool head, a soundless explosion bursting behind my eyes as I crashed into the snow in a spray of blood.

"Something landed atop me, seething, hissing—that wretched woman again. I'd strength enough to flip her over and seize her throat, but as black blood boiled up into her eyes, I felt skeletal fingers snaking into my hair, roaring as fangs sank into the back of my neck.

"It might've ended then and there. The legend of the Black Lion of Lorson. Conqueror of the Crimson Glade. Savior of Nordlund." Gabriel scoffed. "What a fucking joke that would've been. Topped at the last by a trio of filthy wretched on some nothing hill in the middle of nowhere. But a dull crunch rang in my ears, a wet spray of brains painted my cheek, followed by the echo of a wheellock shot in the dark. And the deadgirl on my back toppled away, a smoking hole in the place where her face used to be.

"A greatsword sang in the dark; a blade too large for any mortal man to wield, swung with such force the air *boom*ed behind it. I caught a glint of a roaring bear upon its hilt, a ripple of long golden hair in the night wind. The wretched boy was carved from crown to crotch, and as the body toppled in two, I saw the one who'd cleaved it, standing in the gloom behind—tall and fierce and wreathed in darkness deeper still.

"A silversteel hammer came down on the woman beneath me, smashing her skull to pulp in the snow. She bucked once before falling still, the death she'd been denied finally come to claim her. Trying to rise, I saw another figure now, looming through the red haze across my eyes, big and broad and carved of finest mahogany. As I took the bloody hand he offered, I felt the warmth in him. The loyalty. The love.

"'You should take better care of yourself, mon ami,' he chuckled.

"The other figure nodded. 'One night, we may not be there to save you.'

"'Aaron,' I whispered. 'Baptiste.'

"They stood in the falling snow before me; brothers-in-arms, and brothers beloved. Baptiste Sa-Ismael was big, barrel-chested, his once-black locks now shorn back to stubble and peppered at his temples with grey. He wore dark leathers trimmed with pale fur, a long winter cloak spilling over heavy shoulders and trailing at his heels in the bloody snow. One arm was tied in a sling—a break earned in the battle of Dún Maergenn, yet unhealed. The ghost of a beard darkened his square jaw, and his handsome face was lit by a friendly smile. Yet somehow, its light didn't quite reach his eyes as once it had.

"Beside him stood his beloved, clad in black leathers and a greatcoat of midnight blue, long blond hair flowing in the wind. A boy I'd once hated with all the passion of my foolish youth, but now loved more dear than kin. Yet where once Aaron de Coste had fought beside me against the armies of the Dead, now my brother was *one of them,* his life and light stolen by the teeth of the Wolfmother, and dimmed further by the beast whose brand he still wore atop his left hand.

“The black heart and thorns of Nikita Dyvok.

“‘What the hell are you doing here?’ I wheezed, pawing at my bloody neck.

“‘Saving yer sorry arse,’ came the call at my back.

“I turned at the sound of boots crunching snow, already knowing who I’d see. He stalked from between the dead trees like the hunter I’d taught him to be, a smoking wheellock pistol in his hand. He wore a black greatcoat, adorned with the sevenstar of San Michon. Four more pistols were strapped to his chest, a greatsword on his back. Sandy blond hair was shaved in an undercut, a weave of silver roses tattooed along his temples and down his cheek. The ink was aglow with silver light, the letters GODSWILL burning across his knuckles. As he approached, Aaron hissed softly, stepping back—repelled as any other vampire would be by the aegis of a silversaint.

“‘Lachlan,’ I breathed.

“My old ’prentice flashed a crooked smile, spoke in his soft Ossian brogue. ‘Ye look like shite twice stepped in, ye crusty bastard.’

“‘I’m thirty-three, you little prick.’

“‘Like I say.’ Lachlan winked, tucking the pistol into his bandolier. ‘Ye want a hand, old man? Three wretched *is* a lot to wrangle for a fellow yer age.’

“I winced, holding firm to Baptiste’s wrist as he hauled me to my feet.

“‘Enough bollocks, what are you all doing here?’

“‘We came after you, of course.’ Baptiste dragged a hand across his scalp, sighing. ‘Aaron and I left Maergenn right after Mlle Lachance’s funeral. Followed your trail.’

“Lachlan nodded to the pair. ‘I followed them. On the sneak, like.’

“Aaron arched one brow. ‘I smelled you days ago, you realize. You could have spared yourself the skullduggery and simply traveled with us.’

“‘I don’t ride with leeches.’

“Aaron bristled at that, but my old ’prentice turned his glare on me.

“‘The hell ye thinkin’, toddlin’ off by yerself? Ye had to know I’d follow ye.’

“‘I’d hoped you wouldn’t,’ I said. ‘I set out on this road alone for a reason, Lachie.’

“‘And where does this road lead you, brother?’

“I looked to Aaron as he spoke, a lump rising in my throat that was almost too big to swallow. We’d not had time to talk after the battle; about what he’d become, or my role in it. And to hear him still call me *brother* after all he’d suffered …

“‘Where it’s always led, Aaron.’

“‘Voss.’

“I nodded. ‘And I’ll ask none to walk it with me. I need no company in hell.'

"Baptiste sighed. 'Gabe, I know you loved Dior. I know you're grieved at her death—'

"'*Grieved* doesn't come anywhere close, Baptiste. That girl died because of *me*.'

"'And so ye set out alone to throw yerself at the throat of Fabién Voss?' Lachlan shook his head, silver burning on his skin. 'If ye've a desire fer suicide, I can think of warmer places to end it all. Hell of a lot less walking involved, too.'

"'I've no intent to kill myself, Lachie. I'm killing *him*.'

"'How?' Aaron searched my eyes, frowning. 'The legends of the Order speak plain, Gabriel. No man of woman born can slay the Forever King. You tried once already in vain. And that was *before* the light of your faith failed you once more.'

"I gritted my teeth at that, but wasn't surprised; Aaron was always a sharp one, and he'd grasped the root near as quick as I. The reason why I'd not felt those wretched approaching 'til it was too late. Why he could gaze at me with those pale blue eyes, so full of pain and pity and love, where he could barely stand to look at Lachie at all. The reason *you* can look at me right now."

Jean-François glanced up from the sketch he was working on; a beautiful portrait of the silversaint and his three comrades, drawn with his usual flair.

"Your aegis had lost its glow," he murmured. "Again."

Gabriel nodded, staring at the chymical globe. "I'd turned my back on God when he'd taken Astrid and Patience away. Aaron himself had told me afterward, it mattered not what I held faith in, but that I must hold faith in *something*. So I'd chosen to hold faith in Dior. To believe in her destiny, in the idea she'd somehow make all of this right. That belief had been enough to rekindle the power in the ink on my skin." The silversaint sighed. "And like the fire of my aegis, it had gone to the grave with her."

"But why does it remain dead, de León?" The historian gestured to the tattoos upon Gabriel's skin, silvered but lightless. "You *know* the Holy Grail of San Michon did not die at Maergenn. How is it your aegis is yet unkindled?"

Gabriel scowled, taking a long swallow from his goblet. "I told you at the beginning of this story. All this is a waste of time, Chastain. The cup is broken. The Grail is *gone*."

"But how?" Jean-François demanded, leaning forward in his chair.

The Last Silversaint only shook his head.

"Patience."

Thunder rocked the skies outside, clawing at the tower walls with frozen hands. The historian scowled, returned to his portrait. The silversaint set down his wine.

"I studied Aaron, standing in the snow, tall and fey and bloodless. I realized that terrible blade he carried was Epitaph—the greatsword that had once belonged to Nikita Dyvok, a thousand men ended on its edge. Aaron's face was cold as stone, the glow from Lachie's skin mirrored in his gaze, marking my own faithlessness all the more.

"'You're right, brother,' I nodded. 'I tried to slay the Forever King before, with both faith and blade intact. And I've nothing to show for it but gravesoil. But I've a weapon now even Fabién Voss can't hope to withstand.'

"One blond eyebrow rose slightly. 'Weapon?'

"Reaching to my bandolier, I drew out the parting gifts Dior had given me; or more truthfully, the gifts I'd *taken* as I said good-bye. I hoped she'd not begrudge me them, drained from her corpse as I'd wept, held up now before Aaron's widening eyes.

"Three glass vials, brimming with red.

"'The blood of the Holy Grail.'

"Aaron recoiled a step, as if he could yet feel the sacred power caged in that treated glass. Baptiste reached for his beloved, but Aaron snatched back his hand as if it burned.

"'A blade of enchanted starsteel anointed with this blood burned a Prince of Forever to ashes,' I hissed. 'And I wager it will do the same to the Forever King. So I go to deliver it. My blade, her blood, right into the rotten fucking heart that sleeps inside his chest.'

"'Gabe—'

"'I'm not interested in debate, Lachie. I didn't ask for your help. That whoreson is at the heart of all this. Mayhaps he has some answer to daysdeath. Mayhaps—'

"'Yer nae looking fer answers, Gabriel. Yer looking for revenge.'

"'That's why I'm looking *alone*.'

"Lachie placed a hand on my shoulder, and in his bright green eyes, for a moment, I could see a shadow of the boy I'd fought on the walls of Báih Sìde. The paleblooded son of a monster unrivaled, who I'd taught day by day to be the best man I ever knew.

"'Never alone. Yer back, my blade. Remember?'

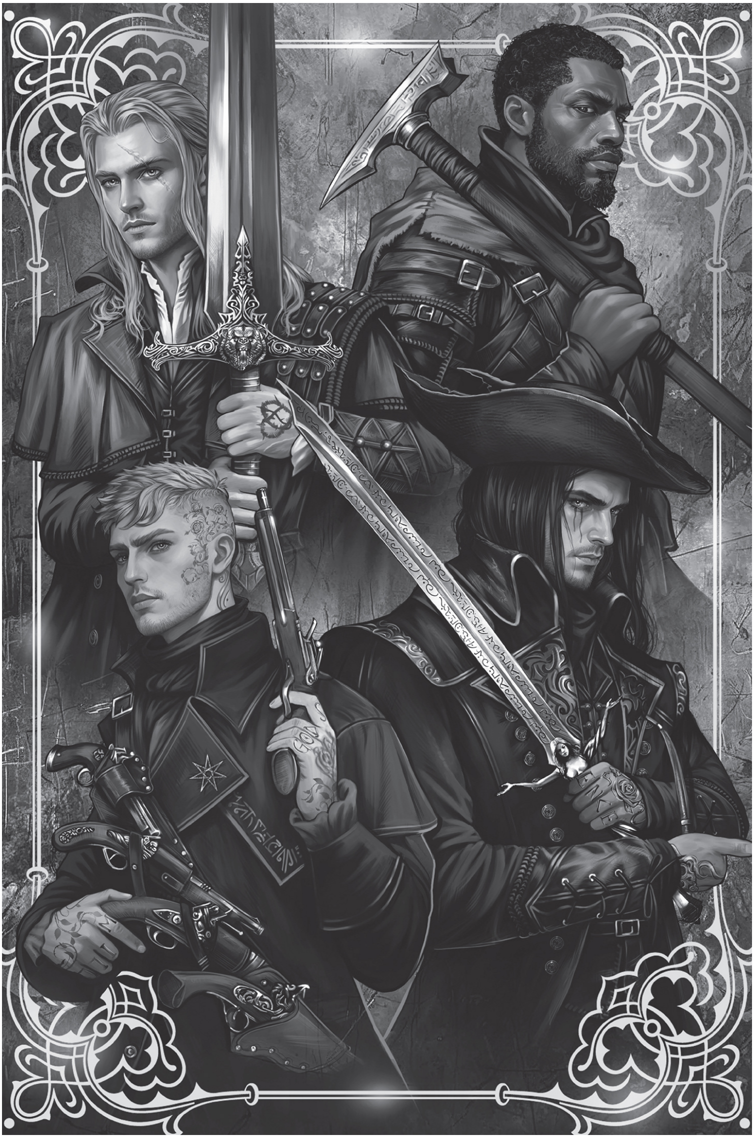
"Baptiste nodded. 'I'd be dead if not for you, brother. And Aaron would still be slaved to that *bastard* Nikita.'

"Aaron nodded. 'We stand with you, Gabriel. Always.'

"'No,' I snarled. 'I've led enough people to their deaths already.'

"'We *all* have blood on our hands, Gabe. God knows you're no one's saint.' Aaron smiled sadly, looking down at his palms. But when he lifted his eyes, beyond the chill of death, the pain of Lachie's aegis, I saw love undimmed. 'But you *are* a hero. We'll not leave you to fight this darkness alone. For all you've lost, you yet have some famille left.'

"Baptiste nodded. 'You have *us*.'



“Lachlan squeezed my shoulder so tight my bones creaked. ‘Brothers forever.’

“My heart was cleaved in two, then cleaved again; to know I led these men so surely into danger, and to know they’d not let me face it by myself. It’s strange to stand beside another in battle, coldblood. To place your life in their hands, and ask them to do the same for you. It forges a bond, that hellfire; an alloy of love and loyalty no time nor tide can rust. And though I’d set out on that road with none to help me, I’d be lying if I told you that my battered heart wasn’t buoyed up by the thought of these men riding at my side. Charging headlong into the battle that must surely be our last, unbowed and unbroken.

“‘I’m no hero, Aaron.’ I sighed, looking among the trio. ‘But I surely know a few.’

“I looked to the night above me. The war ahead of me. The men beside me.

“‘Together, then.’”

III

SPLINTERING

"IT TOOK A few nights for the cracks to really start showing among us. But we discovered the worst of them right away.

"I went to look for Argent after our run-in with the wretched, and soon found him in the shelter of a fungus-riddled oak, hooves stained black with blood. I gave him a hug of gratitude and he snuffled at my cheek, warm and welcoming; one more brother I could count on along this frozen road. Returning to my tower, I found my other brethren, hard at work in the rubble it'd been reduced to.

"Lachie's collar was laced over his face, tricorn pulled low, and he'd fetched a pair of leather gloves to work with. But the glow of his faith still burned in the roses at his temples, lighting the ruins an eerie silver. Baptiste worked beside him despite his broken arm—the strength of the Dyvok blood he'd been thralled with yet lingering in his veins. The pair worked swiftly clearing the wreckage, but it was Aaron who did the lion's share, hefting broken chunks of masonry as large as a man and hurling them like pebbles.

"He was a sight to behold—golden locks and burning blue eyes, snow scattered like diamonds on alabaster skin. Aaron's look had always been princely, but his Becoming had gifted him a bleaker beauty, flawless save for the scar down his bearded cheek, the Blackheart's brand atop his left hand. He'd cast aside his greatcoat, and I could see where the Dyvok had carved his aegis from his flesh, replacing silver with ash. Beautiful designs of Naél, Angel of Bliss, and Sarai, Angel of Plagues, rippled down his arms. He'd the seeming of a god of old, carved in marble by masters' hands. But it was heartbreaking to see this brother of mine reborn of darkness. And understanding what I did of the master he'd served, I couldn't help but wonder.

"What darkness had been awakened in my old friend?

"The trio worked silently, clearing away the tower's stones with barely a word between them. Aaron's eyes were narrowed in the glow of Lachie's aegis, his back turned to the worst of it. But he was still clearly pained in the presence of that silver light; a burning reminder of the thing he'd become. The things he'd done.

"'Are you aright, love?' Baptiste asked.

"'Right enough,' Aaron replied, tossing another chunk of masonry aside.

"'Lachlan and I can clear the rest of this, there's no need for you to hurt y—'

"'I told you I'm fine,' Aaron snapped. 'Stop bleating like a damned maid, Baptiste.'

"The blackthumb fell silent, sullen, hefting a shattered wooden spar and dragging it away. I trudged up the rise, Argent beside me, my steed shying a little as Aaron lifted another slab of broken brickwork and sent it crashing into the deadwood below.

"'Any luck?'

"'Less than none.' Aaron straightened, dragging a golden lock of hair from the corner of his mouth. 'Are you certain it's in here?'

"*'She,'* I corrected, setting to work. 'And oui, I dropped her as I brawled those foulbloods. Ashdrinker's under here somewhere.'

"Aaron surveyed our tiny mountain of broken stone and timber, shook his head. 'Well, we might be here a while. I pray she's worth it.'

"'She's the only blade of her kind under heaven, coldblood,' Lachlan replied. 'If we've a mind to slay the Forever King, damn right she's worth it.' Cold green eyes looked Aaron up and down. 'A hell of a lot more than others I might mention.'

"'Might mention. But *don't.*' Aaron's cold gaze met Lachlan's. 'I wonder why that is?'

"'My ma taught me if I've naught polite to say about someone, say nothin' a'tall. So I've one-eighth of two-fifths of fuck all to say about ye, de Coste.'

"'And I put so much stock in your opinion of me, á Craeg.' Aaron studied his fingernails, scratching at an imaginary fleck. 'Imagine my disappointment.'

"The pair stared each other down—vampire slayer and vampire—the air crackling with threat. I was about to step into the breach when Baptiste cleared his throat.

"'You know, you never told us how you found her, Gabe. The Ashdrinker, I mean. We've heard the pub songs, of course. The barrowkings and riddle contests in the Everdark.’

“‘Fucking minstrels,’ I growled, hurling a stone aside.

“‘The one about Ainerión is my favorite, I think.’ The smith chuckled, turning to Aaron. ‘Remember that one, love? *A Lion Among the Leaves*? That soothsinger up from Beaufort sang it at the Wheelsday feast a few years back.’

“‘How could I forget? He was so out of tune I wanted to choke him on his lute strings.’

“‘Stealing the faequeen’s blade from beneath her pillow after you rumped her to exhaustion.’ Baptiste grinned. ‘You’ll have to give me some pointers, brother.’

“‘Ye honestly believe that twaddling gobshite?’ Lachie chuckled. ‘They’re all *lies,* ye dozy stooge. Yer ma drop ye once too often as a babe or—’

“‘Don’t speak to him that way, boy.’

“Lachlan glanced up as Aaron spoke, soft but deadly.

“‘Not ever.’

“‘Aaron,’ Baptiste began. ‘Lachlan was only jesting, there’s no h—’

“‘Don’t call me *boy,* leech,’ Lachlan growled, drawing himself taller. ‘Or I’ll kick yer arse harder than I did atop the walls of Maergenn. You remember that, aye? After ye slew half a dozen silversaints in cold blood at the beck of yer cunt master?’

“‘Squalling brat, you think I’d a *choice*?’

“‘Peace, messieurs…’ I warned.

“But Lachlan was having none of it, fangs glinting now as he snarled. ‘Ye’d free will enough to cast the Blackheart’s blade aside when he told ye to murder yer sweetie, here. But nae enough to stay yer hand from the throats of yer old brethren?’

“Aaron hurled the rock he’d been lifting aside with a crash. Lachie loosed his collar, his aegis flaring brighter. Baptiste put a hand on his love’s arm, but Aaron snatched it free, stepping closer to Lachlan despite the silvered ink now burning between them.

“*‘Brethren?* The so-called *saints* of San Michon cast me into the wilderness for who I loved! And you name them my brothers?’

“‘Ye were cast out for breaking yer holy oath, nae for who ye chose to break it with! They treated Gabe likesame, ye’ll nae hear him pissing and moaning about it! Ye slaughtered us by the *dozen* on those walls, de Coste. Good men died because *y*—’

“‘Aright, enough!’ I roared, stepping between them. ‘We’ve not traveled a fucking yard and I’m already regretting bringing you along! If you’ve a mind to snipe at each other this whole ride you can fuck off back to Maergenn, the pair of you!’

“Lachlan and Aaron glowered a moment longer, but in the glow of that silvered ink, the vampire was finally forced to look aside, eyes glazed with blood. Snarling, he turned and stalked down the rubble, snatching up his greatcoat and slinging it over his shoulder. With a heavy sigh, I made to follow him, but Baptiste took my arm.

"'Let him go. He needs a breath to cool off.'

"'Breath.' Lachlan spat into the snow. 'Like that stuck-up wanker even breathes.'

"'I'm a gentle man by nature, Lachlan á Craeg,' Baptiste said softly. 'But speak ill of my love again, you'll learn just how fierce a gentle flame can burn.'

"The pair looked at each other in the falling snow, the light on Lachlan's skin slowly dimming as Aaron drifted into the dark. My old 'prentice slowly inclined his head.

"'I bore witness to it aready, monsieur. When ye slew the Blackheart. And nae prouder could I be to have helped ye send my bastard brother to the hell he deserved.' Lachlan dragged a hand through his hair, sighing. 'I mean no disrespect. I give nae a drop of shite who a man beds. But I was raised to kill vampires, and *yer* man—'

"'I understand,' the blackthumb nodded. 'But if I've the right of it, you were also raised among the Dyvok, Lachlan á Craeg. You must know *something* of the tortures Aaron suffered beneath Nikita's boot. So I ask for your understanding in kind.'

"Baptiste offered his hand. A long, quiet moment passed, the wind whistling through the gulf between them. But with a grunt, Lachie finally shook it. 'Fair enou'.'

"'Right,' I scowled. 'Now we've kissed and made up, can we get back to digging? I'd like to find my sword before the fucking rivers thaw.'

"Lachie smirked at Baptiste. 'Was he this surly back when ye knew him?'

"'Think he's actually mellowing in his dotage.'

"'Fuck off, the pair of you,' I growled.

"We set back to it, tossing broken stone and timber aside. I was grateful for the aid—it'd have taken hours to dig through that mess by myself. But working with Lachie and Baptiste, I was reminded of the chief reason I'd aimed to hunt the Forever King alone.

"I could smell it on the night wind now, beneath the sweat rising on our skin, the dressing on Baptiste's broken arm. Working its way down my throat, stabbing like a rusted knife into my belly. The scent, the ache, the *need* of it.

"*Blood.*

"I couldn't forget the last time I'd drunk it. Standing before the walls of Maergenn, my fangs puncturing the wrist Phoebe had offered. Feeling that heat, that blessed bloody *life* flowing through me. The memory had me aching; soft sorrow for the moments Phoebe and I had shared, at what had grown between us before it was torn out by the root.

"I wondered if I should've told her good-bye. There'd been *something* between us, that much I knew from the bleed in my chest when I pictured her fighting at my side through the hell of Maergenn. Thorn and bramble. Blood and scars."

"You were afraid."

Gabriel glanced up, sharp eyes fixing the historian opposite.

"Of falling for another," Jean-François said, dipping his quill. "Difficult to blame you, I suppose. You put your Astrid on such a pedestal, what breathing woman could compare?"

"Know me so well, do you?"

A smile tugged at the corner of ruby lips. "Not as well as I'd like."

Gabriel scowled, sipping at his wine. "It was fear drove me away, I'll grant you. But not of how I felt. It was fear of what I might do. Working in the snow beside my friends, warm and alive and breathing, I *ached* for the taste of that blood again. Like a fiend for his pipe. Like a beggar for his bottle. The thirst conquers all palebloods in the end, Historian, and my own was worsening by the day. I knew that one night soon …

"'Gabe!'

"Baptiste's shout tore me from red memories, the taste of blood on my tongue.

"'Gabe, I think I've found her!'

"I scrambled across the stones, Lachie beside me, over to where Baptiste was digging. He was on one knee, reaching beneath a tumble of rock with his good arm.

"'I just … she's…' Baptiste made a final lunge, crowing in triumph. 'Ahaaaa!'

"With the crisp ring of starsteel, my brother drew his hand from among the wreckage, holding Ashdrinker to the sky. Her blade gleamed darkly, the silvered dame upon the hilt smiling as ever, arms outstretched as if in joyful greeting. But almost as soon as he'd lifted her, Baptiste's victorious smile became a puzzled frown. Lowering the blade, he peered at her quizzically, blinking in slow surprise.

"'She's … speaking to me.'

"'Not screaming?' I asked. 'That's a switch.'

"'Easy, mademoiselle. All is well, I…' Baptiste glanced to me, back to the sword in his grip. 'Oui, he's here. Peace now.'

"I took the blade Baptiste handed me, half wincing at the anticipated barrage of screeched insults. But instead of screaming, Ashdrinker sounded as if she were almost *weeping,* my heart twisting with pity at the sorrow in her song.

"*Oh, G-G-G-GabrielGabriel oh thank M-M-Mothermaid and Martyrs and all the angels of the heavenly host I was frightened so f-f-f-frightened!*

"'Easy,' I cooed. 'Easy, Ash. I'm here now, all's well.'

"*I couldn't see it was so d-dark I couldn't seeseesee I thought ye leftleftleftme!*

"'No, no, hush now. I'll not leave you, mon amie, not ever. You *know* that.'

"*God I remememember shouting at ye I am so sorry, Gabriel. I meant it not, I meant it notnotnot meanmeant it … I would n-never I would NEVER …*

"'You weren't yourself. It's already forgotten.'

"*Forgotten,* she whispered. *What have I forgotten so much somuchmuch lost, oh h-h-heavenly father help me. What is wrong with me I can't remember I can never REMEMBER.*

"Tears stung my eyes at that, a flare of grief and rage and helplessness. But I forced a smile into my voice, touching her face. 'I'm just glad you're back, Ash. I missed you.'

"*And I ye. But … butbut … wherewhere is Dior?*

"I swallowed hard, wanting to tell her all. To share that loss. Choking on my own heart instead, forcing out the lie for fear of what the truth might do to her in this state.

"'She's well. Fear not. We're on our way to meet her.'

"*Oh good,* came the silver sigh. *Goodgoodgood. That girl is the heart of it all, Gabriel. The only thing he left us but g-g-grief and ashes. You mustmust*must *keep her s-s-safe.*

"'I will. You sleep now, Ash. Be at peace. God knows you've earned it.'

"*And ye. My d-d-dearest friend.*

"Her song fell silent as I slipped her back to sleep in the scabbard at my waist, left only with her echoes in my head. Pawing at my eyes, I looked up to find Lachlan and Baptiste watching me, puzzlement on the former's face, concern on the latter's.

"'Is…' The big smith frowned. 'Is she always like that?'

"'No,' I sighed. 'Ever since I broke her on Fabién's skin, she's not quite been the same. But since the Battle of Maergenn … I fear she's getting worse.'

"Baptiste sucked his lip, glancing at the blade. 'Can she hear us? In her scabbard?'

"'See us, too. If she's a mind to, anyways. But she sleeps ofttimes. Dreams.'

"'May I?'

"Baptiste held out his good hand, and unbuckling my swordbelt, I passed Ashdrinker over. Lachlan raised an eyebrow as the blackthumb pressed the blade into his hands, and gesturing that my old 'prentice stay put, Baptiste motioned silently for me. With a curious glance to Lachie, I followed the blackthumb, trailing down the rubble pile until we were a good ways distant. And turning to me in the gloom, Baptiste sighed.

"'She's in trouble, Gabriel. Your blade.'

"'Well, she is *my* blade. Trouble is familiar country.'

"'Her core is cracking.'

"I blinked, gaze sharpening. '*What?* '

"'She's fractured, Gabe. From her tip, near three inches down her length.'

"'No,' I growled. 'No, I'd have noticed.'

"'It's just a hairline. Hard for untrained eyes to see. The damage might've reached a tipping point at Maergenn, but still … it's bad.'

"'But … I need her to kill the Forever King. No ordinary blade will pierce his skin.'

"'Gabe, if you keep slaying coldbloods with her, that crack will only deepen. And on the flesh of an ancien Voss…'

"I chewed my lip, fear rising, thoughts racing. 'Can you fix her?'

"'Shattered swords only get reforged in children's tales. Once a blade breaks—'

"'It's broken, I know, I know. But you're the greatest smith the Silver Order ever produced, Baptiste. Is there *nothing* you can do for her?'

"The big man scratched his stubble. 'I might could forge-weld her, I suppose. It wouldn't mend the damage, but it'd stop it getting worse. You couldn't go swinging her around like you used to, but with luck, a weld could hold for a battle or two.'

"'Good,' I said, chest flooding with relief. 'That sounds good, let's—'

"'Hold now, Gabe. I said I *might* be able to weld her. But the Ashdrinker is made of enchanted *starsteel*. Not even the forges of San Michon burned hot enough to work a blade like her. I only know of two foundries in the whole empire that could manage it.'

"'Where?' I demanded. 'Where are they?'

"'Well, the first is in the capital. The Ironmongers' Guildworks. La Rivière de Fer.'

"*'Augustin?* That's across the other side of the fucking continent.'

"'The other isn't as far. But I'll wager you hate it more.'

"'I'm not in the mood for guess-a-game, brother.'

"'La Forge de San Javon, Gabe. In León.'

"'… Fuck my *face*.'

"Baptiste folded his massive arms, smirking. 'Tempting. But alas, I'm spoken for.'

"*León*. The barony of my grandfather. The hateful bastard who'd cast my mama out into the cold when she fell pregnant with me. The life she'd had to live in Lorson, the death she'd endured in that same cursed sty … all of it was in some fashion his fault.

"I'd never spoken a word to the old prick. Not even in my days of glory, when my name—*his* name—rang out in the houses of the holy and the halls of the Augustin emperors themselves. I didn't even know if he still lived. But it seemed if Baptiste was to mend Ashdrinker, if I still held any hope of ending the Forever King on her anointed edge …

"'… Seems we're heading back to Nordlund.'"

IV

PALE SHADOWS

“WE SET OFF with the strangled dawn, northeast along the Òrd; the strangest quartet those frozen wilds had seen in a while, I’d wager. Despite the company beside me, the day seemed even darker than usual, and the sunlight barely worthy of the name. I rode on Argent, Ashdrinker strapped to my saddle, my eyes drifting toward her silvered smile. I was afeared for my friend now; stricken that her hurts were my fault, hoping she’d still be up to the task of slaying Fabién.

“Wondering now if she’d survive it.

“Lachlan rode at my right, a brave chestnut sosya from the stables of San Michon named Victory beneath him. His collar was laced up over his face, green, kohl-edged eyes constantly searching the wastes around us, one hand always poised at his pistols.

“Aaron kept his distance to avoid unsettling the horses, but as we traveled the deadwoods of Ossway, I could sense a tension among beasts and brethren both. Lachie was on edge, aegis ablaze in Aaron’s unholy presence. Even Baptiste seemed under a cloud. He rode at my left, broken arm slung at his chest, a dun tarreun named Rosebud beneath him. His dark eyes were edged with sorrow, drifting always to his husband, but rarely answered.

“As we rode, he and Lachie told the tale of their final battle with Nikita. All three had played a role in the Blackheart’s death—Aaron casting away Nikita’s sword, Lachie holding him in place. I smiled as Baptiste recounted the deathblow with his silversteel mallet, goosebumps prickling tattooed skin.

"'So love *does* conquer all, eh?'

"Baptiste nodded. 'So the storybooks say.'

"I cleared my throat, not wanting to pry. 'You and Aaron … are you boys well?'

"Baptiste looked toward his love, walking among dead trees in the distance.

"'We're fine, Gabe. A lot to take in, is all. We've not had much time alone since he … changed. We're still figuring it all out.' My brother smiled then, old fire in his eyes. 'But we stand together. And with you. God knows we've survived worse than this.'

"We rode hard through dim days beneath the blackened sun, trying to get as far as we could before the weather turned warmer. The country about us was a frozen wasteland, worse than it had ever been, and trekking through the ruins of Ossway in wintersdeep would have been rough enough. But in Elidaen's brief summer, all would run to muck and mud, and once-frozen rivers would become impassable floodways. We'd a long way to go before León, and trouble was already brewing among us.

"Aaron was hungry.

"I could see it clear; his cheeks slowly hollowing, shadows gathering under bright blue eyes. He pawed his belly constantly, and his temper was wicked short. From the thirst growing in me, I'd a small understanding of the pain he must be feeling. And I knew if he got nothing else to drink, my brother would soon be trying to drink *us*.

"'We need to start hunting,' I declared, sitting around our fire that night.

"Baptiste winced as he inspected his dressing. 'Sick of potatoes aready?'

"I took a long pull of vodka from my hipflask, scowling at the spuds bubbling over the flames. 'Always. But I don't mean food. León is still weeks from here, and Lachie and I don't have enough sacrament to last the distance. These lands are rife with wretched. We need to start catching and bleeding them to make more sanctus.'

"Lachie blew red smoke into the air. 'Foulblood. Nae exactly the finest of flavors.'

"'We've done it before. During the Sūdhaemi campaigns, remember?'

"'Too well. Remember that farmer near Qadir? With the pegleg an' nae teeth?'

"'I can still taste him. Was like smoking a pig's arsehole.'

"'Hell of a siege, though.' Lachie grinned, eyes shining with memory. 'Three days of blood, whole *battlefield* bathed silver. How many marriage proposals did ye get after?'

"'As I recall, the alderman's wife was more smitten with *your* narrow arse than mine. But that was yesterday. Whatever we find along the road to León today, we smoke.' I looked at Aaron, lurking on the edge of the light. 'Or drink, as the case may be.’

“Blue, shadow-smudged eyes met mine. ‘Oui.’

“Lachlan reached into his boot, drawing a silversteel dagger. Twirling it once through glowing fingers, he tossed it point first into the snow at Baptiste’s feet.

“‘Beautiful blade,’ the big smith said. ‘Forgemaster Argyle’s work.’

“Lachlan nodded. ‘Ye’ve a keen eye for steel.’

“‘Oui.’ Baptiste patted his silversteel warhammer. “But I brought my own.’

“‘Can’t open yerself up with a mallet, though. Ye don’t need to cut too deep, like. But if any Dead are close, the scent of a little claret will draw them in like flies to shite. Gabe and I will heal, so nae sense in us clipping a vein. But I can—’

“‘You are *not,*’ came a low hiss, ‘bleeding my man like some hog in a butchery.’

“Lachlan arched his eyebrow at Aaron. ‘Just a scratch, like. I’m nae lookin’ to hack his fuckin’ wedding tackle off.’

“‘I fear we’d need a bigger blade for that,’ Baptiste murmured.

“Lachlan crowed with laughter, and I raised my hipflask in toast. The blackthumb chuckled, winking at his husband, but Aaron wasn’t smiling.

“‘Why are you laughing?’

“The smile died on Baptiste’s lips, in his sparkling eyes. ‘Aaron, we’re just —’

“‘You think this a *jest*? Giggling with this idiot like some snot-nosed schoolboy?’

“I shrugged, taking another pull of vodka. ‘I thought it was funny.’

“‘Of course you did. You’re *drunk,* Gabriel.’

“Lachlan poked the fire, scowling. ‘If I were ye, vampire, I’d spend less time frettin’ on Gabe’s drinking habits, and more on my own.’

“‘Ease off, Lachie,’ I murmured.

“‘Oh, *fuck* him. We’ve *all* got our share of troubles on this road. But there’s only one of us bleating like a sheep on the rag about them. This effete wanker could tumble into a barrelful of tits and come out with naught but a complaint in his gob.’

“Aaron’s hands curled into marble fists. ‘I should crush you like a—’

“‘Try it, softboy. I’ll rip yer baby blues out through yer fuckin’ jacksie.’

“‘Nobody’s ripping anything from anywhere,’ I growled. ‘Ease off, Aaron.’

“‘You’re taking *his* side?’

“‘You’re both on the *same* side. Mine. Now untwist your fucking pantaloons before I knock some sense into the both of you.’

“‘Hell with this,’ Aaron spat, turning and stalking away.

“‘Aye, off ye fuck,’ Lachie called at his back. ‘See if ye can find a sense of humor out there while ye sulk. Or at least some way to pry the stick from out yer poncy arse!’

"Silence fell around the fireside, punctured only by the movement of the horses, the crackling of the flames, the soft tread of Aaron's retreating footsteps. Baptiste was staring at Lachie, drumming his one good hand upon his leathers.

"'I'll wager you're a delight at funerals.'

"'Look, I'm sorry,' Lachie sighed, exasperated. 'But he rubs me raw. I know he's got a heaping of shite on his plate, but we've *all of us* been through hell just now.'

"'He was Lord of Aveléne. Before it was destroyed. A prodigy of the Silver Order, before he was cast from San Michon. Heir to a vast barony, before that was stolen from him too. I've lived with Aaron de Coste for half my life, and I tell you true, the one thing my love hates above all is feeling powerless.' The blackthumb looked to Lachlan across the flames. 'How do you think he felt when Nikita made him kneel?'

"'He's thirsting,' I said, meeting Baptiste's eyes. 'He needs to feed.'

"'And how do you suppose *that* makes him feel, Gabriel?'

"'I don't need to suppose. I know. But this bitchliness with Lachie is wearing thin.'

"Baptiste shrugged. 'He's jealous.'

"I scoffed then, eyebrow raised. 'Of *this* little donkeyfucker?'

"'Oi!' Lachlan flicked snow in my direction. 'Don't talk about yer ma like that.'

"Baptiste stared into the dark where his love had disappeared. 'Aaron has ever stayed faithful to me in his heart. Even in Nikita's arms, he loved me true, I know it. But part of him loves you too, Gabe. Perhaps in ways even Aaron isn't ready to admit. And listening to the two of you speak about your days of glory? Storming walls and fending off proposals and being knighted by empresses while Aaron was forced to live in exile and shame?'

"Baptiste met my eyes and sighed.

"'That was supposed to be *his* destiny, Gabriel. *His* story. Is it any wonder he envies the man who actually got to live it with you?'

"Lachie glanced my way at that, stirring the stew with lips pressed thin. Baptiste stood with a wince, adjusting his sling. 'I'd best go talk to him.'

"'Don't stray far,' Lachlan warned. 'The dark has teeth.'

"'Well do I know it.'

"With a small nod, Baptiste trudged into the deadwood. Sighing, I served up two bowlfuls, handing one to Lachie. We sat in silence, each wrestling private thoughts, me washing down the spuds with more vodka. My liquor was fast running out, and without alcohol to numb it, my thirst would only get worse.

"'We should kick his bloodless arse out of this boat afore he sinks us, Gabe.'

"Looking up, I found Lachie's eyes upon me, firelight dancing on emerald.

“‘I know ye were friends when ye were bairns. I know ye love him like—’

“‘A brother. And so he is. One I walked through hell with. Aaron and I won the Battle of the Twins together, Lachlan. And when the Beast of Vellene was at our throats, it was Aaron who opened his gates to us. Without him, Dior would be de—’

“My voice faded, choking, the thought of her loss falling over me like a shroud. Looking into the darkness, I fancied I could see shapes among the trees now, the scent of silverbell hung on the air with the music of a little girl’s laughter. Two figures waited beyond the fire’s edge, pale as corpses, wreathed in all night’s splendor. The first, a dark angel, a beauty spot painted on a heartbreak-shaped face. The second, a tiny miracle, her mama’s hair and her papa’s eyes, watching me across the wall of death. But between the pair of them—those pale shadows of my two lost loves—now I fancied I could a see a third.

“*Oh, Martyrs forgive me …*

“‘He’s nae yer brother anymore, Gabe. He’s a *vampire*.’

“I blinked hard, banishing those ghosts and fixing my old ’prentice in my stare. ‘He’s only a few months turned. Aaron may not be the man he was, but he’s not had time to become a monster.’

“‘I heard Maergenn folk talkin’ about him afore I left. Whispering horror stories about the Blackheart’s boudoir, and what those two got up to in there.’

“‘He was thralled, Lachie. Just like you were. But when I found you in Báih Sìde—paleblooded son of dread Tolyev himself—I chose to believe you could be more than what you’d been made. After all we’ve been through, I owe Aaron the same measure of faith.’

“‘Yer my brother, Gabe. My capitaine. I owe ye my life, and if ye’re set to put trust in a leech, so be it. But forgive me if I don’t share it. I just pray he proves worthy of it.’

“I nodded, running a thumb over the ink on my hands.

“‘So do I.’

“My eyes drifted to the deadwood Aaron had stalked into. Pale shadows rising amid the scent of silverbell. For a moment, the memory of my Astrid was so sharp, it almost opened me to the bone; soft breath and softer hands, fangs grazing prickling skin, the beast in me rising, endless and serpentine. I pushed it back down into my boots, stuffing my pipe with shaking hands and leaning toward the fire, drawing in a deep red lungful. The sacrament flooded through my veins—nothing close to the real thing, but enough to see the hunger retreat into the shadows.

“Waiting.

“*Smiling.*

“‘They’ve been gone a while,’ Lachlan murmured.

“I blinked at that, lashes heavy, eyes dimmed by a crimson haze. I took another hit, holding my breath, alone in the bloodwarm red behind my eyes until Lachlan spoke again.

"'Mebbe we should…'

"'I'll go,' I sighed, red and roiling. 'You stay and watch the horses. Try not to shit in anyone's boots while I'm gone.'

"He chuckled at that, glancing at Aaron's gear. 'Nae promises.'

"I stood slowly, light-headed with bloodbliss, knowing this sensation must soon fade, but too thick with it to care yet. Trudging toward the deadwood, I stopped at the light's cusp, turning toward that lone figure keeping vigil by the flames.

"'I'm glad you're here, Lachlan. Quarrels aside, there's none in this world I'd want beside me on this road more than you.'

"'Yer back.' He winked. 'My blade.'

"'I'll not be long.'

"'Remember yer training when ye talk. He's a son of Ilon. Law the Second, aye?'

"'… *Dead tongues heeded are Dead tongues tasted*.'

"I stalked into darkness, paleblood eyes seeing true in that endless gloom. The sacrament had every sense tingling: sight, sound, scent, all sharp as a sword's edge. The dead trees were hung with garlands of frozen fungus, shadespine and moldweave and beggarbelly, but I could see small droplets on the icicles now, heralding the coming thaw.

"I followed footsteps in grey frost, struck by how deathly *still* it all was. When I was a boy, the night wilds had been raucous places; full of the calls of hunting birds, the squeak of careless prey, wind whispering among the leaves. But now, the leaves were all fallen, hunters and prey all dead, daysdeath settled over these lands like a shroud. All I could hear in that lonely black was the shift of melting frost, the thrum of my own heartbeat, and distant, almost at hearing's edge, the sound of voices.

"Raised in anger.

"Baptiste and Aaron, both shouting; the familiar tune of the lovers' quarrel. I was of two minds whether or not to intrude until I heard a crash, Aaron roaring in fury, lifting my nose to the wind and catching an all-too-familiar scent.

"*Red. Red. Red.*

"I ran, heart thundering in my chest as I plunged through the wood, praying no ill had befallen Baptiste. But piercing a tangle of fallen trees, I saw two figures in a clearing ahead, wreathed in the scent of fresh blood and heartbreak.

"'Take it!' Baptiste cried.

"He stood with hand outstretched, breath boiling on his lips. Even in the bitterbleak dark, I saw the source of that wondrous scent—a slice in his palm, bleeding fresh. Across the clearing, Aaron stood like a crooked portrait, golden hair framing his horrified face.

"'Drink!' Baptiste demanded, stepping forward.

"'No,' Aaron hissed, shrinking back.

"'You need it!'

"'I do not *want* it!'

"'Aaron, don't be foolish, you'll starve w—'

"'Do not call me a FOOL!'

"Roaring, Aaron lashed out at the dead elm beside him, unholy fury in his veins. The tree split at the root, tipping like a drunkard with a deafening *CRACK*. Ice and snow crashed earthward, but Aaron had already moved, looming now but an inch from Baptiste's face.

"'Were I a fool, I would give the beast inside me its head! Were I a fool, I would kiss you as fire does tinder, no heed for the *ashes* I'd leave behind!'

"'You wouldn't hurt me. You love me, as I love y—'

"'Of course I do! And it is for the *sake* of that love I tell you *NO*!'

"Aaron turned away, withering to his haunches in the snow, hands pressed to his temples as a broken sob caught in the back of his throat. His teeth had grown long, hideously sharp, and even in the dark, I could see bloody tears shining in his eyes.

"'You don't know,' he whispered. 'What he did. What he *bid me* do.'

"'Then *tell* me,' Baptiste pleaded.

"'I would.' Aaron hung his head. 'God help me, I'd spit that poison just to be rid of its taste, but for the *terror* that you'd never look at me again as you do now.'

"'Godssakes, I love you, Aaron, nothing will change that!'

"But Aaron only shook his head. 'You don't know, Baptiste. You can't.'

"Baptiste clenched his jaw, anger and sorrow in his voice. 'You *must* feed.'

"'Not from you. Not ever.'

"'You'll starve yourself, then? Wracked with thirst 'til you can bear no more? Lachlan is already itching to hack your head off; what do you think he'll do if you lose control?'

"'I can feed on wretched. Gabe near said as m—'

"'So you'll glut yourself on rottens, but refuse to touch *me*?' Baptiste gritted his teeth, tears in his eyes. 'Are you so eager to leave me behind, husband mine? Could it be you're bored of me already?'

"'Stop talking nonsense,' Aaron snarled.

"'You think I'm a simpleton? You think I don't know what's coming? With me getting older every day and you remaining young and beautiful forever?'

"'Baptiste, I will *always* love you.'

"'Then prove it.' Baptiste held out his bloody hand. '*Take* it.'

"Aaron looked up into his husband's eyes then, red tears spilling from his own.

"'You want me to,' he realized, horrified. 'You *want* me to … to bite you.'

"'Is that so wrong?' Baptiste cried, face twisted with anguish. 'You weren't the only one to taste the pleasures of the Dyvok, Aaron! Kiara drank from me a dozen times, and I can't forget that … that … *God…'* He bit his lip, searching the skies above for words that might describe the impossible. 'Sweet Mothermaid, the way it made me *feel*—'

"'Oh, no,' Aaron whispered. 'Baptiste, no, no, she was a bloody *monster*.'

"'I know it!' Baptiste took another step forward, dripping hand outstretched once more. 'But if a devil like her could give me such a glimpse of heaven, what might I feel with you? Don't you see, love, it's *perfect*! You need it! And I *want* it!'

"'You've no idea what you ask of me! If I start and cannot stop—'

"'You wouldn't hurt me. I love you, Aaron. And I am not afraid.'

"Aaron met his beloved's eyes then, whispering in a voice that shivered the dark.

"'*You* are *afraid.*'

"'Aaron, I—'

"'*Your legs buckle,*' Aaron growled, rising now to his feet. '*Your belly fills with ice, and your bowels run to water. You're* terrified, *Baptiste. Of me.*'

"'Aaron, n-no, I—'

"'*Run back to the fire. Huddle in its light and pray God for protection and flinch at the sound of my return.*' Aaron drew himself up tall, eyes glinting like shattered glass, a black radiance gathered about him like a cloak as he spoke again. '*Fear it, love.*'

"Baptiste gasped, his face bloodless, staggering and almost falling. With a cry, he turned, stumbling over root and twig as he fled that clearing, that whisper in his wake.

"'*Fear me.*'

"Aaron stood now in the cold alone, head bowed, hair tumbling about his bloodstained cheeks in golden waves. Bleak winds clawed his greatcoat, but he was motionless as marble for long and silent moments. Until he finally drew breath to speak.

"'You can come out now, Gabriel.'

"I hung still a long moment, watching in the dark. My grip on Ashdrinker's haft was white-knuckle tight, and though I kept her sheathed, my hand never left her hilt as I stepped from among the dead boughs.

"'Is that for me?' Aaron asked, eyes falling upon my blade.

"I watched him in the darkness, sorrow etched so deep in the blue of his eyes they seemed almost black. But if I looked hard, I could still see the shadow of the boy I'd once known, the brother I yet loved, trapped in a hell I could scarce imagine.

"'No,' I said, my hand slipping from Ash's hilt.

"'Perhaps it should be. Monsters are meant to be slain, after all.'

"'You're no monster, Aaron.'

“He laughed at that; hollow, bitter, fangs like daggers in his gums.

“‘If you were,’ I insisted, ‘you’d be glutting yourself at Baptiste’s throat right now, instead of using the gifts of your blood to frighten him away.’

“‘Not *my* blood. My father’s.’

“Aaron looked to his chest, spreading his shirt to show me the roses and serpent there. The sigil of his father’s line. Once they’d been inked in silver, shining with the light of his faith. But now, they were black. Like the rest of his aegis. Like the stains on his soul.

“‘I am a paleblooded son of Ilon, oui. I can bend mortal wills with a whisper. But my blood is Dyvok, Gabriel. The blood of the Untamed. The blood of *savages*.’

“‘You’re not like them, Aaron. You’re more. You’re better.’

“‘You’ve no idea what I am. What I’m capable of. Nor did I.’ He looked down at his hand, black heart and thorns burned into his skin. ‘Until he showed me.’

“‘You’re not what he did to you, Aaron.’ I stepped to his side, taking his arm. ‘Nikita slaved your will, as surely as your flesh. And bound in chains of blood by one of the most powerful vampires on earth, still you found strength to defy him.’

“‘Only once.’

“His whisper was almost too faint to hear, fragile as porcelain.

“‘All those p-people…’

“‘It’s not your fault. It was battle, Aaron. The ’saints were trying to kill you, you fought for your life. I’m glad you won through.’

“‘Not *those* people.’ He looked at me then, haunted, hollow, such anguish in his gaze I felt tears in my eyes. ‘The others. In … in his b-bed. Women. Men. Ravaged and ripped. Buckled and bloodied and broken, oh G-God, Gabriel—’

“‘It’s not your fault! He made you do it!’

“‘Perhaps. But I … A part of me…’

“He hung his head, bloody tears pattering in the snow.

“‘I enjoyed it, Gabriel. I *reveled* in it.’

“I flinched, belly dropping so hard toward my boots, I had to swallow the vomit. My chest felt cleaved open, and I cast my eyes to the skies above, to the God watching, the God *laughing,* a curse roiling behind my fangs that he’d fashion such a hell for my friend. Even after all he’d suffered, Aaron stayed true to heaven’s king. And this was his reward? Hunger undying, and hell awaiting?

“‘I don’t believe that, Aaron. You’re one of the finest men I know. The bravest. The most faithful.’

“‘Faithful?’ he scoffed. ‘I’ve no faith in me anymore, brother. What would be the point? No grace in heaven for the damned.’

“‘Then seek it in something else! If prayer offers no more comfort, then mine your salvation from a different lode! Love! Loyalty! Honor!’

“He hung his head, his voice a soulless whisper.

“‘It matters not what you hold faith in. But you must hold faith in something.’

“‘Oui!’ I hissed, squeezing his arm. ‘So you told me in the darkest of my hours, and never were truer words spoken! Believe in Baptiste, if nothing else! In the love not even Nikita’s blood could drown! You’re worth a thousand of him, Aaron. Don’t let him ruin you!’

“‘And who are you to preach of belief, brother?’

“His eyes drifted to the silver on my skin, cold and lightless.

“‘You who believe in nothing?’

“‘Aaron…’

“‘I am *fallen,* Gabriel. All hope of heaven abandoned. Only hell awaiting. And if I must cleave to purpose, it is to ensure I do not drag my beloved into that abyss with me. But preach not to me of salvation, brother. Because when this unlife is taken from me, when I descend into the pit I so truly deserve, we both of us know…’

“He met my eyes, bloody tears in his own.

“‘I will see you there.’

“He spoke no more, turning and stalking into the shadows. I saw no point calling after him. He’d shot true, and we both knew it. Damned, the pair of us. One grim desire each now left to guide us—Aaron, to safeguard his beloved through this trek into hell, and I, to put another in it before I tumbled down after him.

“I looked to the sky. Hissing my hatred.

“My purpose.

“My prayer.

“*‘Fabién.’*”

V

THE DAMSEL OF LIONSMOUTH

"SO WE TRAVELED, on through black days, dark clouds over our heads. Cutting northeast across lifeless foothills, the dark spine of the Mìchaich na Baloch looming before us. I thought of Phoebe again when I laid eyes upon the Moonsthrone; the silk of her skin, the fire of her blood. Thirst clawed at my belly, twisting, *gouging,* and I pushed all memories of her aside, burying them in the ashes behind and vowing to think of her no more.

"It was only in children's tales that everyone got a happy ending.

"Phoebe was better off without me.

"We hunted as we went: small game for the pot, and foulbloods for the pipe. We'd bleed them to fill a foundry, cook a dose of the sacrament to keep Lachie and me sated. Aaron would take the rest. He refused to feed in front of us; unwilling to endure the disdain in Lachlan's eyes. Returning to our camp later with the scent of dead blood on his tongue, ashes on his hands, avoiding the pain in Baptiste's gaze.

"It was awful to watch the ire rising between them, born of love. But I ran out of vodka two weeks into the trek, and between nightmares of Celene, Ashdrinker's growing instability, and the agony of my thirst, I'd troubles enough of my own to fret on.

"We made good time at first, up the Ossian coast, but like tides and taxes, spring came inevitable, and our pace became a fucking *crawl.* Snow became sludge, and sludge became mud. The roads were knee-deep mires, sucking and slurping like black tar, and worse, as the frost melted, the countless dead slain in Nikita's winter wars were slowly unveiled. Our road became an open grave, reeking of rot and shit, swarming with flies.

"Most of the legends I grew up with were as much about the journey as the destination, Historian. But as I've said before, it takes a better talesinger than I to make miles of endless drudgery seem interesting. Truth is, as dark and awful as that road was, we walked for weeks without many tremors in our strange new normal.

"Summer was in its prime before the tale's next real twist.

"We were stood at the crest of a tall rise that day, squinting into a sodden valley, a half-arsed sunset staining the westward oceans blood-red. Aaron was off scouting for prey, and Lachlan was sat tall in his saddle, looking through my spyglass while I pored over an old map. I knew we must be close to the Barony of León by now, but couldn't be sure without a landmark, scowling at the parchment and cursing under my breath.

"'Fishertown down there,' Lachie reported. 'What's left of it, anyways.'

"'Might be Lionsmouth?' I offered. 'That used to be around here somewhere.'

"'How old is that map of yours?' Baptiste asked, suspicious.

"'Older than he is,' Lachie muttered.

"'Ancien, eh?'

"'Fuck you both, I'm thirty-three,' I growled.

"'Thirty-four soon, if memory serves.'

"'Well, you're still older than me, smartarse.'

"'Perhaps in years, Chevalier.' Baptiste stroked his handsome jaw. 'But not in miles.'

"I scoffed, peering through the gloom at the town below. It was a muddy, crook-eyed shitehole to be sure; a guardtower ringed by a broken wall, bucktoothed buildings leaning on each other like pissheads at last call. But it was big enough to be Lionsmouth—one of the keeptowns on the borders of my grandfather's great demesne.

"'Whole place looks abandoned,' I muttered.

"Lachlan tensed, rising in his stirrups to point. 'Nae the whole of it.'

"I squinted into the gloom, salt winds whipping the scars on my cheek. Dim and distant, I spotted a figure fleeing across the moldering fields surrounding the town below.

"And in that figure's wake …

"'Give me that,' I demanded, taking the 'glass from Lachie's hand.

"My old 'prentice drew a wheellock as I raised the 'glass. I saw the figure closer now—a woman, near my age, sprinting red-faced toward the town. She wore good leathers, knee-high boots, midnight hair as long as she was tall streaming behind her. Her face and knees were blacked with mud, hands bright red with blood. And behind, snarling and tumbling through long-rotten vineyards came more than a dozen …

"'Wretched,' I whispered.

"'For San Michon!' Lachlan cried.

"He laid his heels into Victory's flank, and the sosya took off, hooves athunder. Baptiste and I followed, galloping in Lachlan's wake, Baptiste drawing his silversteel hammer from his saddle. The time we'd traveled had near-healed his broken arm, but he still favored his other, forge-hard fists curling about the haft. My own hand closed on Ashdrinker's hilt, drawing her into the moldy summer stench with the song of starsteel.

"*Aish'da nomrehaam vo k-kaiden na?*

"I blinked, teeth gritted as Argent seethed beneath me. Hammering down the muddy slope toward the fleeing woman, I spared a glance for the blade in my hand.

"'What?'

"*Aish'da no d-d-da?* she demanded. *Tovrem ma'hai? So voth ne demaisat, Gavrael?*

"I blinked again, recognizing the last word as something close to my name. The language Ash spoke was lyrical, wonderful, possessed of a beauty somewhere beyond music, but though she seemed at least to recognize me …

"*V-v-vaneth do khavalesh, besaid kiirov, Gavr—*

"'I can't understand a fucking word you're saying, Ash!'

"We hit the gully below the slope, sod spraying behind, Argent an engine of muscle and bone beneath me. Through the gloom I saw our damsel in distress, fleeing across the fields toward the fishertown, wretched closing in behind. We were cutting fast toward her flank, too distant yet to help, but if she turned toward us …

"'Over here, mademoiselle!' Lachlan roared. 'Come to us!'

"She glanced our way, stumbling and breathless, but rather than looking relieved at the sight of her rescuers, she seemed confounded. This close, I saw she wore a leather patch over one eye; one side of her face bore a terrible burn scar. And instead of turning toward us, she kept sprinting, weaving in a jagged line toward the fishertown. The walls were stone, but overrun with shadespine and luminous maryswort, collapsed in a dozen places. Twin statues of lions stood beside an empty archway, the gates long fallen. No defense at all.

"'What the *hell* is she…' I drew breath and roared. 'What the hell are you DOING?'

"*K-k-khaval de'ali notata-ta-ta-ta Gav-gavr—*

"'Shut the *fuck* up, Ashdrinker!'

"Lachlan raised his wheellock, drawing a careful bead down the silversteel barrel. And though one and a half thousand pounds of sosya seethed beneath him, he fired true, the shot smashing into the closest wretched's head and peeling off the top of its skull. Silvershot sizzled, rotten brains painted the bloody sky as Lachie unloaded a second wheellock, smashing another coldblood's head to pulp.

"'Back!'

"I squinted at the shout, saw our damsel roaring as she ran.

"'Go *back, damn you*!'

"'She's bloody *crazed,*' Baptiste hissed.

"'She's bloody *dead* if we don't reach her!' Lachie spat.

"We thundered on, horses bearing down on the wretched, the wretched bearing down on her. The damsel made the broken gates, dashing beneath the archway to whatever shelter waited behind those walls. We closed in at a gallop, Lachlan spurring Victory on toward a moldy fenceline at the road's edge. But my belly was sinking as I studied that muddy pathway, hunter's senses tingling at the *wrongness* in all this, Ashdrinker shouting in my head all the while.

"*Lisaid kiirov, Gavrael! KIIROV NA'DAL!*

"'LACHIE, *'WARE*!'

"I reached for Baptiste's reins as I roared, Rosebud pulled up short, the blackthumb shouting as he was near hurled from his saddle. Lachie glanced back at my shout, but Victory was committed now, the brave sosya leaping the fenceline onto the road in front of the wretched, hooves striking mud and sod, piercing the layer of thatch it had been laid upon with a *crack,* and plunging headfirst into the pit trap beneath.

"I heard Victory scream, Lachlan roar, the earth collapsing beneath them. A few of the wretched plunged into the pit after him, the vampires behind leaping over the great hole now yawning in the road, thirty feet wide and fifteen across. They dashed onward toward town and prey, but figures rose up from behind those broken walls now; a score of archers in black tabards and chainmail. They bore strange crossbows, their iron sights crowned with circles of burning fire. And at the order of that raven-haired damsel they let fly, shots streaking across the dark. Each crossbow fired not one quarrel but a dozen, the shots catching fire as if by magik and laying half the foulbloods low at a single stroke.

"*'Reload! '* the damsel cried.

"I flew off Argent's saddle, thinking only of Lachlan. I could see nothing past the lip of that pit save the long shadows of wooden shafts, sharpened to vicious points. The salt-sweet perfume of blood hung in the air; I heard Lachlan roar, a booming wheellock shot. A foulblood reared up before me, rags ablaze. I cut it down with Ashdrinker, bone parting like butter, cool crimson splashing my face. I danced among the wretched then, parting heads from blazing necks and legs from burning torsos, lost in the poetry of steel. Ashdrinker had begun to sing—the words yet in that strange, beautiful language, but the song itself so bright and full of joy I swear, I near felt *tears* burn my eyes.

"Up on the walls, the damsel raised a beautiful longsword, its blade etched with a pattern like fire. As she twisted the haft, I heard the *snakk* of metal springs, of iron on tinder, and as if by magik, her blade burst into flames. With the cry *For León!* the damsel leapt from the walls, wading among the Dead now, hewing and hacking with her burning blade, roaring with hatred as the coldbloods fell around her. Her archers lifted their bows, each slamming a long, thin box into the haft before letting fly with another volley. The air was filled with more burning arrows, hissing as they came, *shuffshuffshuff!* Coldbloods fell like wheat before the scythe, most too rotted to make a sound as they burned.

"And then it was done. The ground littered with smoldering corpses, the black smokestink of burning flesh not enough to fully drown my raging thirst. I *ached* with it, sore tempted to lick the gore from my lips, my silvered hands, the dark steel of Ash's blade. Instead I staggered to the pit, Baptiste beside me, bloody warhammer in hand.

"'Lachie?'

"'Sweet f-fuckin' Redeemer,' came the groan.

"Looking down, I saw him in the pit's belly, sagging and drenched with blood. Three wretched were in pieces about him, but Lachie was impaled through belly and shoulder by those sharpened stakes, and his poor brave sosya Victory was dead; pierced through chest and throat by those same cruel lances, and bled out into the mud.

"Lachie gasped as he dragged the broken stake from his belly, fangs drenched red.

"'Need a hand?' I asked.

"'P-prefer a stomach,' he moaned, pressing one bloody palm to the gaping wound and fumbling for his pipe. 'Mebbe give me a m-minute, aye?'

"'Reload,' came a soft command.

"I heard the clunk of crossbows, Baptiste nudging my arm.

"'Gabe…'

"Glancing up, I found that company of archers on the broken walls now staring down their burning sights at me. They were twenty strong, scarred and battle-hard, and each wore a circle of ash scribed upon their brow. Looking closer, I realized their crossbows were mechwork—marvels of steel and cog that allowed them to fire a dozen shots from spring-loaded quivers with a single pull, set alight as they sailed through those burning sights. Their eyes were cold, faces grim, none so much as the damsel who led them, standing before those walls with burning sword in hand. I saw her blade was mechwork too, some cache of lamp oil in the haft, I suspected, lit by flint and spark—ingenious surely, but nowhere near magikal. The oil was running dry now, flames sputtering. But fire still burned in her eye as she spoke.

"'State your name and business.'

"I stared back, Ashdrinker dripping in my hand, still humming that silver aria in my mind. 'Well that's hardly the thanks I was expecting, madame.'

“*‘Thanks? ’* she spat, glancing at the carnage about us. ‘You near ruined our whole snare, you bloody fool. And got your fool friend slain in the process.’

“‘He’s not dead. Though his pride is surely bleeding.’

“‘K-kidneys too,’ came a low groan from the hole.

“‘We come in peace, madame,’ Baptiste called. ‘Seeking to aid you in what looked a fight for your life. Surely that warrants kinder greeting than *this*?’

“The woman’s gaze narrowed, hard as black pearl. She was Nordish born, pale of skin and sharp of jaw, a few years older than me. Black hair was cut in a long fringe over the leather patch across her eye. Despite the burn scar down her cheek, some might have called her beautiful, but there was a coldness to her, cruel as winter dawn. The longblade in her hand was well used, and pinned on the leather doublet above her heart, I saw a sigil of gleaming gold: a sword wreathed in flame. I noted her men wore it too—not wrought of precious metal, but carved of wood or bone. I’d seen the same in San Michon, inked silver into the skins of men I’d named brothers and friends.

“The sigil of my namesake.

“*Gabriel, Angel of Fire.*

“‘You trespass in the realm of my noble lord,’ she declared. ‘And Almighty God knows I have fought the Dead long enough to ken their foul magiks when I see them. Your strength is unholy. Your friend should be a corpse. You are thralls at best, servants of the fallen at worst. State your name and business, or die where you stand.’

“‘You would die before the order left your lips, petite chasseuse.’

“The bowmen turned at that voice, hissing surprise as they looked to the figure behind them. Aaron crouched atop the broken guardtower like a bird of prey, greatcoat billowing in the wind, his awful greatsword poised in one pale hand.

“‘Bonsoir, madame,’ he smiled. ‘Messieurs.’

“*‘Coldblood! ’* one of the archers roared.

“‘Bring it *down*!’ the woman cried.

“‘No, *HOLD*!’ I roared.

“Crossbows sang and quarrels flew, *shuffshuffshuff!*, trailing bright tongues of flame. But Aaron was already moving, cleaving the air with his blade. Epitaph’s shockwave split the arrows asunder, flaming kindling falling like rain as he struck the ground, leaping again, the dark strength of his blood sending him sailing back into the air. A glint of golden hair and flashing steel and midnight silk, he alighted atop the broken wall, turning on the bowmen. And with that smile still curling his lips, he gave a courtly bow to their leader.

"'Those bows are impressive beasts indeed,' Aaron told her. 'But you'll need to shoot sharper if you wish to slay *this* beast, little huntress.'

"*'Reload! '* she roared.

"'Stay your hands, damn you, we come in peace!' I bellowed.

"'Peace?' the woman spat. 'This *leech* among you? Servants of the dark as I s—'

"'We serve no bastard coldblood!' I roared, holding the sevenstar on my palm aloft. 'We are come from Maergenn, where two Princes of Forever and the Priori Dyvok lay slain by our hands! This is Baptiste Sa-Ismael, once capitaine of Aveléne and smith of the Silver Order!' I glanced to the big man behind me, who nodded gravely. 'Aaron de Coste, once Lord of Aveléne and sworn silversaint, slain by the Untamed but *not* conquered!' As Aaron smiled at the dark-haired woman, I heard a groan, and gestured to the bloodied figure now dragging himself from the pit. 'Frère Lachlan à Craeg, loyal brother of San Michon, by whose deed and word was dread Tolyev himself slain at Crimson Glade!'

"Lachie spat blood, raised one shaking hand to show the sevenstar aglow upon his palm. The archers looked on us amazed now, a whisper rippling among them like a spell.

"*'Silversaints…'*

"'And as for my name, madame? I have been known by many—'"

"Oh *dear*."

Gabriel looked up, found Jean-François watching him from the armchair opposite. Thunder rolled across distant mountains as the vampire arched one brow.

The silversaint scowled. "Oh dear *what*?"

"You're about to start listing all of your accolades again. *Slayer of Whatshisface. Victor of the SuchandSuch. Hung Like a Rogue Wildebeest. Bangs Like a Privy Door in the Wind.*" The historian flipped through the remainder of the tome in his lap, sighing. "It's all very impressive, Gabriel, but if you're going to do it every time you meet someone new in this history, we shall need a bigger book to record it in."

"… Rogue wildebeest?"

"Well, I'm *assuming…*"

"I've told you before, coldblood. When someone insists on measuring manhoods—"

"And yours is the biggest, whip it out and be done, I know, I *know*. Not to criticize, but you spend a *great deal* of time talking about penises, Gabriel."

"You started it, you cockeyed little—"

"See what I mean?"

The silversaint glowered, reaching for his wine. But as he met Jean-François's eyes, a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. The smile became a grin, and as Jean-François chuckled, a bubble of laughter burst on Gabriel's lips. The Marquis joined in, the pair now caught up in the laughter's spell; tension between jailed and jailor melting like snow in the summer breeze. Leaning back in his chair, pawing away bloody tears, the vampire sighed.

"I have said it before and I shall say it again." Jean-François shook his head. "You are *beautiful,* mon ami."

Gabriel's own smile faded from his lips, and he drowned the last of it with a swift gulp of wine. "I fear our damsel found me less impressive."

"Indeed?"

The silversaint nodded, refilling his goblet. “And for all your complaints about me marinating in my own accolades, she cut me off before I’d a chance to speak a one.

“‘And as for my name, madame? I have been known by many—’

“‘Save your breath,’ she growled, raising her hand.

“I frowned, studying her closer now the thrill of battle had died. That dark hair. Darker eye. Something in the line of her jaw, the shape of her nose …

“‘You are that blackguard who wore my lord’s name like a cheap cloak,’ she hissed. ‘Dragging it and our city besides into the mire of your disgrace. Sinner. Failure. Oathbreaker. Your name is Gabriel de León, monsieur. Be *sure* that it precedes you.’”

“Oh, I *like* her,” Jean-François said.

“Fuck off, vampire.”

The historian chuckled, turning a page as the silversaint continued.

“Aaron and I exchanged a glance as the woman spat rebuke. Lachlan stepped into the uncomfortable silence, pawing blood from his belly. ‘Yer from León, m’lady? We seek the City of Lions, on a matter most dire.’

“‘León’s sons and daughters all,’ she replied, chin held high. ‘Loyal servants of Gerrard, Defender of the Faith, and thirteenth Baron of the House León.’

“‘Oh, *most* impressive,’ Aaron murmured, studying his fingernails.

“‘Be silent, leech. Afore I burn out your godless tongue.’

“‘Ye have us at disadvantage, m’lady,’ Lachie said. ‘Ye know our names, but—’

“‘She’s famille, Lachie,’ I said. ‘Through and through. ’

“The woman met my eyes, imperious, jaw clenched tight. I’ll admit my pride was a little stung at this greeting—I received a hero’s welcome in most places I visited, and to be spoken to like a disobedient pup who’d just taken a shit on the rug …

“‘I am Charlotte de León,’ the woman declared. ‘Loyal servant of God, granddaughter of Baron Gerrard, and Lady of Lions.’

“I inclined my head in greeting, stomach sinking. ‘Well met then, cousin.’

“‘Would that I could share the sentiment. Bastard.’

“*‘Chevalier,’* Baptiste said. ‘S’il vous plaît.’

“‘And if I do not please, monsieur?’

“‘I fought at the Battle of the Twins, mademoiselle.’ Baptiste nodded to the pale shadow on the wall. ‘As did Lord Aaron. We were both there to witness Gabriel de León slay one of the seven Princes of Forever, and save all Nordlund from the legions of Fabién Voss. We stood in San Michon Cathedral thereafter, where his shoulders were kissed by the blade of Empress Isabella de Augustin herself. Your cousin earned his title that day.’

“‘And sullied it every day thereafter. And the name of ma famille besides. Or is bedding nuns and breaking holy oaths de rigueur in Aveléne these nights?’

“‘Aveléne is fallen, Mlle de León,’ Baptiste replied. ‘Its murdered sons and daughters avenged, and its justice meted, by the man you scorn so freely.’

“Charlotte met my eyes at that, hand drifting to the sigil above her heart. Another man was come down from the walls now—a grizzled fellow looming at her right side. He was an officer by his look, sword-hard hands, eldest of her company. As he whispered into my cousin’s ear, she met my eyes, jaw clenched.

“‘A moment, messieurs.’ She glanced to Baptiste. ‘S’il vous plaît.’

“‘Well, this is going *splendidly*.’

“Aaron had dropped from the walls like a stone, landed in the mud like a feather. Standing beside me now, he brushed soot off his lapel, his voice a low murmur.

“‘Mayhaps our needs might be better served in the capital after all. Augustin is a trek, surely, but we may find warmer welcome there for anointed Swords of the Realm.’

“‘We just spent two months dragging our arses here, de Coste,’ Lachlan hissed. ‘Ye want to spend another six walkin’ to the fuckin’ capital?’

“‘The stink should’ve washed off by then. Yours notwithstanding.’

“Lachie rolled his eyes, looking to me. ‘We should hold firm. These seem godly folk.’

“‘Godly, oui.’ Baptiste nodded to the ashen brows, the flaming swords pinned to each chest. ‘But they wear the sigil of your namesake, Gabe. Not the wheel.’

“‘He’s patron of León,’ I replied. ‘Legend tells it was the Angel Gabriel who commanded the first Baron de León to bring civilization to the wilderness in God’s name. And so long as his children’s faith in the Lord endured, so would his walls.’

“‘Attend!’

“We turned to Charlotte, her grizzled lieutenant scowling beside her.

“‘By order of our lord, any coldblood or thrall in the Barony of León is to be meted swift death.’ My cousin’s eye met mine, gleaming hard. ‘In light of your imperial accolades, you will not be put to the torch immediately. But you *are* trespassers here, uninvited, unwelcome, and in company of the Dead. I vow to the Almighty you will not be harmed, save by word of my lord. But you *will* submit yourselves to our keeping, surrendering your arms until my Baron deems you are worthy to wield them in his lands.’

“Twenty crossbows creaked as they were trained on our chests.

“‘Be assured I will lose *no* sleep if you refuse,’ Charlotte said.

“I glanced among my brothers, scowling all. We placed ourselves in peril submitting here. But hardened as they were from hunting the Dead, these folk were mere mortal men and women. Even unarmed, I knew we could swim in shit this deep.

“The real problems would arise in León. It seemed my grandfather still lived, and I’d no idea how he’d react to my arrival, let alone Aaron’s. If things went tits up in the heart of his keep, we’d be in blood deep enough to drown us. But that had always been the risk, I supposed, and despite Aaron’s bullshittery, none of us were in the mood to drag our sorry hides across the empire when a forge fit to mend Ashdrinker was now so near.

“So, I bowed, shrugging off bandolier and wheellock. Aaron stabbed Epitaph into the muck, watching with a grim smile as my cousin’s lieutenant tried to lift the massive blade. As Lachlan slung off his pistols, Charlotte stepped across the mud, crimson cloak billowing about her. Unbuckling Ashdrinker from my waist, I kissed her hilt farewell.

“‘This sword and I have been through hell together. Please take care of her, cousin.’

“‘I will refer to you by title,’ Charlotte replied. ‘You will do me the same courtesy. For though our Empress saw fit to leave you with your laurels after you dragged our name into the sewer, be assured that the hell you and your blade have ridden through will be frozen solid before I *ever* speak of you as famille.’

“I nodded at that, proffering my blade.

“‘Dame de León.’

“A curt nod. ‘Chevalier.’

“And snatching Ash from my hand, Charlotte stalked off through the mud.”

VI

AMONG THE ASHES

“OUR JOURNEY WITH Charlotte was *slightly* less enjoyable than a fucking funeral.

“Each mile toward the city of my mama’s birth was a slog through stinking mire, and there was precious little cheer to be found upon it. Our meals were raw mushrooms washed down with brackish water, and rather than the drinking and bawdy conversation usually found among soldiers around a campfire, each day ended just as it began—with a roadside mass. Lachlan and Baptiste both partook out of politeness, but Aaron and I demurred, of course, observing proceedings from a good safe distance.

“As capitaine of the company, Charlotte led the service, offering each of her men a sip from a beaten metal flask as she renewed the ashen circles on their brows. Her voice was iron as she quoted the Testaments—not reading, mind you, but reciting by heart.

“She was no pulpit-huckster. No prancing preacher like some I’d known, all swagger and grift. When Charlotte spoke the word of God, I could see his fire in her gaze. When she talked of damnation, ever she looked toward Aaron and me. And watching her each dawn and dusk, I soon marked my dear cousin for exactly what she was.

“A coldhearted, dyed-in-the-wool *fanatic*.

“Though their courage was in no dispute, Charlotte’s hunters were as unsettled as nags in the knackery at our presence. These soldiers were trained to hunt and kill the Dead, and to find a vampire in their company—

unbound, unslaughtered—clearly had every one of them on edge. We did our best to *act* like prisoners, but my cousin had saved everyone the indignity of actually tying us up for the trek—I could break most bonds if pressed, Lachie was stronger than me, and Aaron could bend forge-hardened steel with his bare hands. Our blades and wheellocks were kept under guard in the hunters' wagon, axles creaking dangerously under Epitaph's weight. Charlotte's men rode with hate in their eyes and weapons in hand—those wondrous mechwork bows just begging to sing.

"The road to my grandfather's capital was a black quagmire, reeking of rot. I knew this had been wine country in sweet yesteryears, but those hills and fields were riddled with fungus now, dead vines clawing upward from the earth like hands of the restless dead. Every mile along the road was marked by an iron gibbet, creaking on a rough timber frame. Upon each cage was scribed the crime of the corpse therein.

"*WYTCH.*

"*THRALL.*

"*LEECH.*

"With his poor horse slain, Lachie walked beside Argent and me, Baptiste rode upon Rosebud, Aaron far out on our flanks as ever. Lachlan packed a pipe as we slogged northward on the third day, his expression thoughtful as he studied Charlotte.

"'A godly lass, this cousin of yers. Spirited too.'

"'Spirited?' I scoffed. 'Stubborn as three drunken mules, more like.'

"Baptiste smiled. 'Obstinance runs in your famille, then.'

"Lachie chuckled red smoke. 'Shame he missed out on the good looks, aye?'

"'And the wit.'

"'Look, are you cunts going to get sick of dogging me anytime soon?' I asked.

"'I don't believe we're planning on it, no,' Baptiste replied.

"'You might offer a little moral support, considering where we're headed.'

"Lachlan scoffed, handing over his pipe. 'This *is* moral support, ye fuckin' blouse.'

"I pretended to grumble, but my lips still twisted in a smile as I breathed the sanctus into my lungs. I knew full well these men would ride straight through hell if I asked, and in time-honored tradition, they were showing it the only way most men knew how—by heaping as much shit onto the shoulders of the one they loved as possible.

"Baptiste's eyes were on the road ahead, but every so often they drifted to Aaron in the distance. 'Jesting aside, what troubles you, Gabe? This road was of your design, but the nearer we get to the end of it, the more unquiet you seem.'

"I sighed, resisting the urge to recount the litany of my woes. Truth was, months on, my heart still bled for Dior, and the knowledge I'd let our only hope of ending daysdeath slip my fingers was a wound I thought would never heal. I'd run out of liquor long ago, and without that crutch, my thirst had blossomed to a full-blown bonfire in my belly, only briefly cooled by ever-increasing doses of sanctus. But in the end, I settled on my nearest fear.

"'My grandpapa cast my mama from his house when she was eighteen years old, Baptiste. She was three months pregnant, and all she left León with were the clothes on her back, her name, and this.' I took off my glove, showing him the silver signet ring she'd gifted me as a boy. 'And the root of her downfall was her decision to keep me.'

"'But all the things you did since,' Baptiste insisted. 'All the lives you saved. You're a hero, Gabe. Everyone in the empire knows your name.'

"'*And* that I brought that name into disrepute. Seducing a bride of God. Dragging her into sin.' I shook my head, lips pursed. 'Legally speaking, I probably shouldn't have taken the name at all, but the vampire who bedded my mama wasn't kind enough to spare me his.'

"'Did she ever talk about him? Your father?'

"'She promised to. But the Wraith in Red murdered her before she had a chance. Celene gave me his name, at least. *Wulfric*. Ancien of the Faithless. Lord of San Yves. She was his student for a time. Before she murdered him.'

"'Seven Martyrs,' Baptiste whispered, signing the wheel.

"I only shrugged. 'I tried, but honestly, I can't muster many fucks to give for my papa's death, brother. It's not like he gave any for my life.'

"Lachie whistled for attention, pointing nor'ward. 'Yonder.'

"I saw it in the muddy distance now—a pale smudge on a clifftop coastline. The last bastion of civilization west of Redwatch. All the lands about had run to ruin; fiefdoms toppled, vast swathes of Alexandre's empire ceded to the never-ending rampages of bloodlords and wretched. But I had to admit I felt a swell of pride as I looked upon the city of my forebears, still standing in a world fallen to its knees.

"'*La Tanière du Lion,*' I murmured. 'The Lion's Den.'

"'She's a beauty,' Lachlan nodded, his voice wistful. 'Always wanted to see her. She was designed by the grandmaster Charl Benoît, but he died afore construction could begin. T'was his lass Annalise broke the ground, and his grandson Duvall oversaw construction. She's limestone for the most part, quarried from local cliffs, like, but the basalt inlays are mined from the Godsend Mountains to the north. Her walls run near *ten miles,* and she's provisioned by sea, so any besieger would have to come by land *and…'*

"Lachie's voice faded as he realized we were staring at him.

"'I like castles, aright?'

"'Clearly,' I murmured.

"'Leastways I studied something *useful* in the monastery. What did ye ever master in San Michon, save brushin' yer pretty hair and playin' grab-arse w' nuns?’

“‘… Touché.’

“Night had fallen like an anvil by the time we neared the city’s walls. They stretched out before us now; pale limestone, towering forty feet high. The battlements were lit by braziers, ringed by a deep drymoat, filled with more of those cruel wooden spikes and hemmed with iron gibbets. The drawbridge was raised, heavy oak bound in iron. Banners flew proud upon the ramparts, alternately embroidered with lions and crossed swords, or the sigil of the Angel Gabriel; that blade wreathed in flame. Charlotte pressed a horn embossed with the same to her lips, a somber note splitting the night.

“‘La Lionne Cendrée!’ came a faint cry ahead.

“The shout was taken up along the walls, soldiers pointing. ‘Dame Charlotte!’

“‘La Lionne Cendrée returns!’

“‘*The Ashen Lioness,*’ Lachlan murmured, watching Charlotte sidelong.

“‘Good title,’ I nodded. ‘One wonders how it was earned.’

“‘Wonder on, then,’ my cousin replied coolly, not meeting my eyes. ‘Not everyone needs drunken buskers and brothel troubadours to sing of their exploits. Some are content that the Father shall count their worth on their day of judging.’

“‘Spend lots of time in the company of brothel troubadours, do you?’

“Charlotte glowered, attentions drawn away by a deep *clunk* from the gatehouse. With the creak of heavy chain, the drawbridge was slowly lowered over that vast moat of stakes, *thump*ing to rest in the mud. Mighty iron gates beyond swung wide with an ominous creak, revealing a long, arched tunnel behind. A cadre of soldiers stood at its end, two score strong. They carried burning torches or more of those wondrous crossbows, clad in surcoats and mail, black tabards bearing the sigil of House de León.

“‘Wait here,’ Charlotte commanded. ‘Lieutenant Mathieu, rest of you, with me.’

“My cousin strode toward the gatehouse with her company and the wagon of weapons, leaving us in the shadow of those creaking gibbets. Aaron drifted closer, Argent stomping warning, ever skittish in his presence. Aaron’s eyes were fixed on the fires atop the walls, the men there gathered, peering down the burning sights of their bows at us.

“‘I always wondered why the Forever King never attacked this place.’

“‘Fabién’s mind was ever on Augustin,’ I replied. ‘And these walls are no jest.’

“‘I’d follow you into any dragon’s maw, brother.’ Aaron glanced to those gibbets, the bones and ashes therein. ‘But something about this city feels … ill.’

“I frowned at that, searching Aaron’s eyes as Baptiste murmured.

“‘We could still leave?’

"'Leave?' Lachlan scoffed. 'We've nae dragged our arses all the way here just to—'

"'Come forward!'

"It was Charlotte calling, soldiers gathered in legion about her. Beyond the gatehouse tunnel they waited in, I could see a firelit courtyard, a limestone keep looming into the night. My brethren and I exchanged wary glances and dismounted, trudging toward the lion's jaws. Closing on the gatehouse, we were all conscious of the eyes now watching us, the burning crossbows trained upon us, how bloody this might get. But we also knew if we couldn't mend Ashdrinker's hurts in León, we were in for a *long* trek to the capital, and God only knew if Augustin's walls would be standing by the time we arrived.

"We crossed the drawbridge, hooves clomping mud-stained wood, on into the tunnel. Charlotte awaited at the far end, silent until we passed beneath the gate arch.

"*'Seal it! '*

"With the chatter of metal teeth and the song of iron, a portcullis slammed down behind us, sealing off the tunnel at our backs. At the same time, a second portcullis fell ahead, cutting off our advance. Rosebud reared up in fright at the deafening crash, Baptiste shouting alarm, Aaron flashing back the way we'd come in a blinking. He could've made it clear, slipping across the drawbridge with his unholy swiftness before the portcullis fell. But that would've meant abandoning his love, and despite the shadow festering between them, I knew Aaron would *never* abide that.

"Instead, the four of us now stood trapped in that tunnel like rabbits as the terriers come barking, solid iron bars in front and behind. Charlotte stood on the other side of the fore-portcullis, archers training bows on our chests, dark eye fixed on mine.

"'Is this the worth of your oath?' I demanded. 'You swore we'd not be harmed!'

"'Save on word of my lord. I go now to seek it. Pray to whomever the godless worship that my Baron deems you more worthy of mercy than I.' Charlotte glanced to her second, voice cold as the iron between us. 'If they try to break through, Lieutenant Mathieu, slay them all. Starting with our good Sword of the Realm.'

"My hands closed about the bars as she strode away. Baptiste placed a gentle hand on my shoulder as the metal groaned. I looked to Aaron, wondering if he could smash through the portcullis before too many arrows flew. If you don't gamble, you won't win, coldblood. But this was a bad wager, and we all knew it.

"'Well, then.' Lachie reached for his pipe. 'Anyone know any jokes?'

"'Your haircut,' Aaron murmured, studying the archway above.

"'Good one.'

"'*Far* from it.'

"'You will forgive ma dame.'

"I glanced through the portcullis as Charlotte's second spoke. Lieutenant Mathieu was a bear of a man, salt-and-pepper hair, thick beard, dark eyes. The scars on his knuckles and the prowl in his walk spoke of a life spent in battle, but he was soft-spoken, thoughtful; a good right hand for a capitaine who ran hot as my cousin.

"'Mlle de León is a faithful daughter of God,' he said. 'But she has no love of the Dead, Chevalier.' He glanced to Aaron, scowling. 'Nor those who truck with them.'

"I nodded. 'All know these are dark nights. But her ire seems … personal.'

"The man scratched his beard, glancing after my cousin.

"'You wanted to know how ma dame got her name.'

"'I fancied we'd seek out a brothel in the city, ask the nearest troubadour.'

"The man scoffed, nodding to the keep behind us. 'This city is a sanctuary, Chevalier. The last light in the west. But twelve years ago, León teetered on the edge of a knife. We were infected. *Corrupted*. Highblooded vampires had lived here in secret for years, and when daysdeath fell, no longer did they fear the light. Three broods—mediae of Voss, Chastain, Dyvok—crawled from their nests, staking a claim of the Lion's Den. They'd no armies such as you battled in your youth; these bloodlords fought a shadow war. Their thralls held sway on our council, members of the Baron's own house fell to the spell of their blood. My bride Leóna was handmaid to Charlotte's mother, Elsbet.' The lieutenant hung his head and sighed. 'She was murdered with her mistress and her husband when the Chastain made a play for the Baron's throne.'

"'Condolences, monsieur.'

"Mathieu nodded, throat gone tight. 'Merci, Chevalier.'

"'And your dame?' Aaron asked. 'La Lionne Cendrée?'

"The lieutenant's lip curled, eyes glittering with hate. As he stared my brother down, I knew what he saw now: The same kind of fiend that had murdered his beloved.

"'Ma dame was stricken with grief when her parents were slain,' he replied. 'She went to Le Dôme, León's great cathedral, to seek solace in prayer. But upon that holy ground, she was instead given a *vision*. Same as her blessed ancestor had once seen. The sight that bid him build this city, this beacon that yet burns in our dark.' The man gestured to the iron pin upon his hauberk. 'Gabriel, Angel of Fire, his sword dripping flame and his wings ablaze. And at the sight, ma dame was *filled* with the light of the Lord.'

"Around him, Charlotte's archers made the sign of the wheel.

"'Alight with his faith, she set out to reclaim our city from the Dead. She purged the council and her grandfather's house of those corrupted by the highbloods. Putting them to the rack, learning where their masters slept. And in one fell day, she destroyed them *all.*’

“I glanced to Lachlan, sighing.

“‘Forgive me, Lieutenant. But that sounds the tallest kind of tale. How did a twenty-year-old woman take down three broods of highblooded mediae?’

“‘With the three things that built this empire, Chevalier. Faith, steel, and black ignis.’

“Lachie smiled, fingers drumming on his powder horn. ‘She blew them up.’

“Mathieu nodded. ‘The Dyvok had claimed the docks. The Chastain slept beneath the council hall. The Voss, the theater district. The fires ma dame set were terrible. *Thousands* died. But better to burn off a gangrenous arm than allow the sickness to spread.’

“‘Seven Martyrs,’ Baptiste breathed.

“‘She walked the ruins thereafter. Looking into the faces of those whose homes she’d destroyed, whose loved ones she’d burned. Some called her hero. Many, butcher. To this day, most know not what to make of her. But the name they settled upon, *all* know.’

“*‘The Ashen Lioness,’* I murmured.

“I heard the doors to the great keep open and, as if summoned by her name, my cousin emerging with a cohort of fresh soldiers. I watched her march across the bailey, burn scars etched on her face, fire in her eye. Twelve years back, I was being cast from the Silver Order; it was little wonder I’d not heard my cousin’s story before. But it was also no surprise Charlotte thought so ill of me. While I was off seducing nuns and breaking sacred oaths, she was burning half this city down to save the other.

“‘Quite a woman,’ Lachie said.

“‘Quite a *lunatic,*’ Aaron replied.

“Charlotte stopped before me, sword singing as she drew it from her scabbard. Lieutenant Mathieu stepped back, his ash-kissed brow darkening. The portcullis yet stood between us, Charlotte’s one good eye locked on mine. I was tense as the bowstrings in her archers’ hands, Aaron bristling beside me, set to crash through those iron bars before these fanatics killed us all.

“Charlotte’s lips curled as she spoke.

“‘Baron Gerrard will see you now.’”

VII

INTO THE LION’S DEN

“LEÓN WAS A pale beauty, cradled in broad stone arms. The city was built in a crescent-shaped bay, her buildings carved into sloping limestone cliffs, three hundred feet high. Broad streets and narrow stairs ran in steep cutbacks down toward the ocean, and on the rocky shore, a mighty port had been built. León sat ensconced in that arc of stone like royalty upon her throne, and if the city was a queen, then the château was her crown.

“It was wrought of that same bright limestone, inlaid with the designs of dark basalt Lachie had mentioned. A garrison of twenty thousand soldiers called it home. Ma famille had ruled here thirteen generations. West of Augustin, it was the safest city in the empire. And I couldn’t shake the feeling we were waltzing into a serpent’s nest.

“Charlotte marched us across the bailey to a pair of great doors, her men on all sides, tense as coiled steel. Guards snapped off salutes as she approached, but didn’t meet her eye. The keep seemed busy; bright lights behind her many windows, banners fluttering on her walls, and echoing on her stone, of all things … *music*.

“I glanced about us, uneasy. ‘Is the House of Lions always this … lively?’

“‘Hardly,’ Charlotte replied, returning the guards’ salutes. ‘You have the good fortune of arriving on the anniversary of Baron Gerrard’s birth.’

“‘His saintsday feast,’ I realized.

“‘Seventy years old, this very eve. Now come. Your host awaits.’

“‘Mlle de León.’

"Charlotte bristled at the sound of Aaron's murmur, as if she loathed to be reminded of his presence. She did not deign to turn, speaking over her shoulder instead.

"'What is it, leech?'

"'Regretfully, I will not be partaking of the good Baron's hospitality.'

"Charlotte turned then, rage splintering the dark of her eye. 'You will go where you are commanded. Thank Angel Fortuna I have not already *burned* you to—'

"'Command as you will, mademoiselle. But no vampire may enter a home without invitation from one who lives there. And you would be a fool to offer me that.' Dead blue eyes glittered in the glow of Lachie's tattoos. 'You are not a fool are you, Lionne Cendrée?'

"I sighed softly at Aaron's words; at one more reminder of the thing my brother was become. But the very act of cautioning Charlotte was more proof that Aaron still had good intentions, and I met Lachie's eyes to underscore the fact. As my old 'prentice scowled in answer, Aaron motioned to a long stone building on the bailey's edge.

"'I shall wait in the stables. With the other beasts. There aren't many by the sound.'

"'I'll come with you,' Baptiste offered.

"'No.'

"'Aaron, you're my husband, if you're to sleep in straw, then I'll—'

"'I said *no,*' Aaron snarled.

"Baptiste fell silent, eyes downturned. Aaron's voice softened then, gentle and sad.

"'Trust me, love. This is for the best.'

"Lachlan and I exchanged another grim glance—both knowing exactly what Aaron meant. We'd not had occasion to hunt since Charlotte found us, and Aaron must have been starving by now. I understood the pain my brother had to be feeling in the presence of all these *people,* thirst crawling up from his belly with flaming hands. I swallowed hard, my tongue ashen, watching as Charlotte nodded to Mathieu.

"'Go with it, Lieutenant. Lock it in the stable, and set a cadre with torches at every door. If it tries to leave, if it even *speaks* to one of you…'

"Her eye fell on Aaron's, glittering with menace.

"'Burn it to death.'

"Aaron's gaze flickered to Lachlan, then back. 'I can see why he likes you.'

"Lachie scowled as I placed a hand on Aaron's arm. 'We'll talk to the Baron. Mayhaps we'll find no welcome here, and it's back to the road. Either way, we'll be swift.'

"Aaron smiled, his gaze like knives. 'Enjoy the party, Gabriel.'

"My brother was marched away by a dozen bristling soldiers, Lieutenant Mathieu looming at his back, Baptiste staring after his love. Charlotte turned to another of her men.

"'Lock their weapons in the armory. Tell the steward to triple the guard and that I alone shall have the keeping of the key.' Looking to me with brow raised, my cousin gestured to the doors. 'After you. Chevalier.'

"And heart thumping, I stepped across the threshold of my grandfather's house.

"The entrance hall was polished oak and blood-red carpet, gables reaching high overhead. Banners bearing the house arms and lamps wrought of goldglass adorned the walls. Beside the doorway stood a tall statue—a likeness of Angel Gabriel, one hand holding a burning blade, the other, a goblet filled with clear liquid. Charlotte dipped her fingers, touched her forehead, her lips, her heart, looking to us expectantly.

"'*More* holy water?' I asked, brow raised.

"'No thrall nor leech may abide its touch,' Charlotte replied. 'In the City of Lions, attendance at duskmass is compulsory, and every home has a font such as this at its door.' I fancied I saw rising flames reflected on Charlotte's narrowed eye as she stared me down. 'Those who do not learn from the past shall suffer the future, Chevalier.'

"I sighed, dipping my fingers. 'Véris.'

"The beautiful music grew louder as my cousin led us down a broad stone corridor. The wealth dripping from the walls set me thinking of our little hovel in Lorson—leaky thatch and draughty windows, my heart bleeding to know my mama had let all this go just to hold on to me. We stopped at last outside a pair of tall oaken doors set with bas-reliefs of the house arms. A maidservant awaited there—a dark flower in an astonishing azure gown, smoky eyes and long black curls, four masks of papier-mâché in her hands.

"The maid curtseyed as she laid eyes upon us. I tried to ignore the hymn of her pulse, fantasizing instead about the liquor awaiting beyond those doors.

"'Holy Frère. Monsieur.' Her gaze flickered up to meet mine. 'Chevalier.'

"'What are the masks for, mademoiselle?'

"The maidservant smiled shyly. 'The banquet is a masquerade, Chevalier.'

"'Merci, Odette,' Charlotte said, snatching a black domino. 'Be about your duties.'

"The maid curtseyed, eyes downturned once more. 'Mlle de León.'

"Odette handed us a mask apiece; a punchinello for Baptiste, a shining sun for Lachlan, a second domino for me. And with another curtsey, the maid backed away.

"Another font bearing Angel Gabriel's likeness stood beside these doors, and Charlotte touched her brow, lips, and heart again—it seemed no chances were taken in allowing servants of the Dead to enter this house. Binding her mask about her scarred face, my cousin waited until we'd done likesame. And satisfied, she knocked.

“The doors parted, revealing a vast room, awash with light and life. The rush of sensation threatened to overwhelm me—music and laughter and body heat and wine and deep below that perilous undertow, like a bellyful of razorblades …

“‘Ye aright, brother?’ Lachie asked softly.

“I swallowed hard. ‘I’d kill everyone in this room for a mouthful of Ossian black.’

“A grand ballroom lay before us, packed with a waiting throng. Long tables skirted the room’s edge, fire burning in three great hearths. The walls were hung with standards of the house, goldglass chandeliers glittering above like stars long lost. The dancefloor swayed with masked revelers, minstrels playing on fiddle and flute and drum. The messieurs wore frockcoats and hose, the dames beautiful gowns and ornate wigs, curls stacked atop their heads as if in contest to see who could first reach heaven. Older gentry sat in conversation, masked maidservants filling golden goblets with actual, honest-to-God *wine*. It was a revel I’d not seen like of since my days at the Emperor’s court, and I’ll admit I was taken aback—to witness such indulgence when the world outside these walls was on its knees …

“‘Mesdames and messieurs! My noble Baron!’

“All dancing and talk fell still as my cousin called for attention. I rubbed ruefully at my road whiskers, fingertips brushing the scars on my cheek. Trying not to think of the girl who’d gifted me them. Most of my gear was in my saddlebags, but at my waist and in each sleeve I could still feel the weight of her gifts—three vials of holy blood, secreted in the hems of my shirt. I’d not been in this place a heartbeat and already I wanted to be gone. I knew I’d no need to be anxious—I was the Black Lion of Lorson, Slayer of Tolyev, Savior of Nordlund. Folk sang songs about me, mothers named their fucking babies for me.

“So why was I fretting like a maid on her wedding night?

“‘I present Baptiste Sa-Ismael, Capitaine of Aveléne; Frère Lachlan á Craeg, Silversaint of San Michon; and Gabriel de León.’ Charlotte scowled. ‘Sword of the Realm.’

“All eyes turned toward our company, standing atop the stairs like jesters at a funeral. Silence hung heavy and dark as lead. Lachie cleared his throat. Baptiste coughed. But faintly, out in the mob, I heard someone begin to clap. It was slow at first, scattered, but soon, applause filled the room. Gentry rose from their seats to bow, the demoiselles dropped into curtseys, the seigneurs lifted their glasses and called ‘Santé!’ Standing beside me, Baptiste nudged me with his elbow, smiling, ‘See? They *love* you.’

“And gazing about the ballroom, I took a small, grim bow.

“Charlotte marched us through the masked throng until we stood before a long table at the room’s end. A multitude was there gathered, men and women, young and old, dark of hair and eye. Most were relations of mine, I supposed, though I knew no names, and behind the masks—lions for the most part—I could see little of their faces. I noted an older gent with a shaved head and mild blue eyes, wearing the blood-red cloth of a bishop. His robes were velvet, the wheel about his neck was gold, wealth dripping from every finger. A young fellow dressed in fool's motley stood down one end of the table, balancing atop a wooden ball and juggling what appeared to be five daggers, steel flashing in the air.

"All this I'd soaked in within a second or two, my whole body on edge. But as my cousin spoke again, I turned attentions to the man at the heart of it all, sitting in a tall wooden chair carved with snarling lions.

"'Baron Gerrard, trothbrother of Emperor Alexandre III, Defender of the Faith, Sword of the Realm, and thirteenth Baron of the House of the Lion, may I present Chevalier—'

"'Gabrieeeeel de León,' came the call.

"I looked to the one who'd spoken—that Fool juggling at table's end. His face was painted white, eyes blacked, a slash of red paint across his lips in mockery of a smile. I could see his motley had once been garish, but like all else in this empire, the riot of colors had sadly faded. Balancing upon his ball, he wobbled toward me, blades flashing as he tossed them into the air. I noted the knives were adorned with lions upon their hilts.

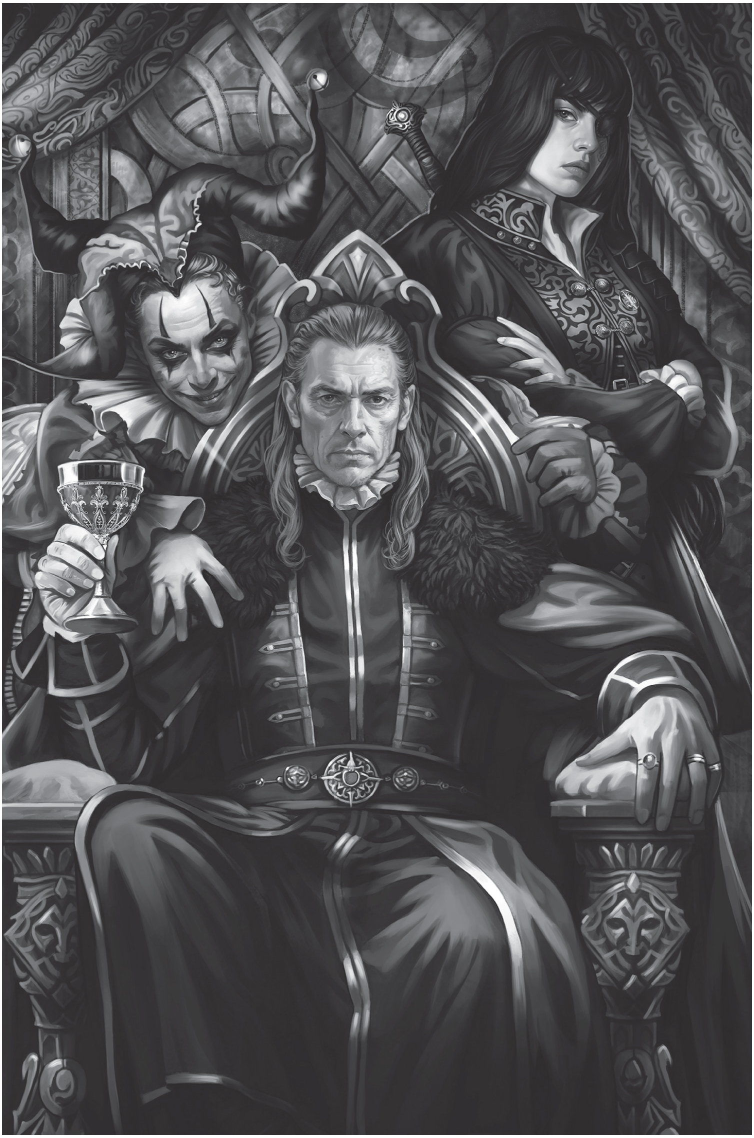
"'Savior of Nordlund!' he crowed. 'Until the ravens picked clean its bones. Liberator of Triúrbaile! Until saints of silver burned it to the ground. Thief of names and breaker of oaths, rumper of faequeens and despoiler of nuns and son of mo—'

"'Enough, Caspién.'

"It was the Baron who'd spoken, dark grey eyes now fixed on the Fool. His voice was oceans deep, bringing what little motion there was in the room to stillness—all save that simpleton on his ball of course, still juggling as he bowed.

"'My Baron.' Watery blue eyes turned to me, painted lips twisted. 'Chevalier.'

"I glowered a moment, fantasizing about stowing those daggers in an idiot-shaped sheath. But remembering where I was, I turned back toward my host.



“I’ve no idea what I was expecting. When I was a boy, my grandpapa had been a figure of distant hatred—an evil old cur who’d torn away my mama’s birthright and robbed me of my own. As I’d grown older, grown *up,* my hate had cooled, hardening from rage to contempt. I’d become a father myself in those years, and I could no more imagine turning my back on my child than I could cutting my own heart from my chest. But in truth, I’d supposed this man long dead. A bitter, broken old skeleton who’d died alone, ruing the pride that had bid him cast his only daughter into the cold.

“But though the man before me was old, he was no bag of bones. Gerrard de León looked as tall as I, no doubt just as broad in his youth. His long hair was run from black to grey, but still thick despite his years. His hands were wrinkled, but not shaking as he raised his goblet to me, eyes the same shade as my mama’s glittering above the rim.

“‘Fairdawning, Chevalier. I bid you and yours welcome to my home.’

“‘Godmorrow, Baron.’ I bowed, returning his formality. ‘We thank you for your hospitality, and bid you best wishes on this, your saintsday.’

“‘Merci.’

“My grandfather’s stare roamed my companions for a breath before shifting back to me. Unlike any other in the room, Gerrard wore no mask; as if above the game he insisted others play. At a word from the Fool, the minstrels picked up a new song, my temper flickering as I realized the tune he’d requested was *A Lion Among the Leaves.* But though the minstrels launched into the bawdy ballad with abandon, fully half the room was listening intently now, the other half no doubt cursing they were too far away to hear.

“‘I am told you are come to my door on urgent business of the realm?’

“‘We have need of your foundry, good Baron. La Forge de San Javon.’

“One slow blink. ‘My forge.’

“‘My blade, the Ashdrinker, is damaged. My brother Baptiste believes he can mend her, but only a flame of surpassing heat can work starsteel. And I fear only a blade of starsteel will suffice in the hunt ahead.’

“‘A hunt, you say.’

“I nodded, drew a deep breath.

“‘I am going to slay Fabién Voss.’

“A murmur crossed the ballroom, like a wave on a storming sea. At mention of that dread name, the bishop made the sign of the wheel, a hush came over the minstrels once more, and that Fool at last fell still, knives falling to the floor as he gawped.

“‘The Forever King.’ My grandfather stroked his chin in the ringing silence. ‘If one may judge a man by the cut of his enemies, you are a man of quality indeed.’

“I drew breath to reply, but my throat instead seized shut. My belly wrenched sideways, flame clawing up toward my thundering heart. I realized that, in dropping his knives, that prattling stooge had nicked his finger, blood now welling bright on his skin. The Fool pouted at it, squeezing with his thumb until a bright pearl of crimson formed at his finger’s tip. I stared, mouth flooding with spittle, the beast in me *slam*ming up against the bars of its cage. It seemed an age of the earth passed, all the stars in heaven burning out like candles before the little shit finally slipped it into his mouth to suck it clean.

“‘… Chevalier?’

"I turned back to my grandfather, speaking low to hide the fangs in my gums. 'I make no claim to quality, Baron. But in matters of slaying the Dead, I hold my own.'

"'And yet my granddaughter informs me you have brought one to my door?'

"I tasted dust, swallowed ashes. I could still *smell* that blood, red and bright and—

"'My swordbrother, Aaron. A f-former silversaint, only a few months turned. The dark has made claim to him, but he is *not* yet fallen to it. I vouch for his conduct on my life.'

"Charlotte sneered at that, sharing a dark glance with the bishop. The Baron looked to Lachlan, to Baptiste, back to me, and though no mask covered his face, still, it seemed he wore one. I thought again of my mama, the fury that must have blazed in this man's heart when he flung her from his hearth; pregnant with the bastard who would go on to be sung of in every taverne from Vellene to Asheve, before dragging his name into disgrace.

"He had me over a barrel, and we both knew it. If any of that old ire remained …

"'Are you quite well?' he asked.

"'I … A drink would be most welcome, Baron.'

"'Forgive me. I am being a poor host. And it *is* time for toasting, I suppose.'

"My grandfather snapped his fingers. That maidservant who'd met us at the door stepped forward, gown rippling like liquid sapphire, a golden platter upon her hand. Ornate goblets and a green glass bottle were placed before my grandfather with unerring poise. The Baron drew a beautiful blade from his belt, cracking the pale waxen seal about the bottle's throat, staring down at the lion illustrated upon the faded label with a wistful smile.

"'Gabriela laid these down twenty years ago. God rest her soul.'

"'… Gabriela?'

"'My dear wife. Your grandmother.' The Baron filled the goblets, dark eyes meeting mine as the scent of wine kissed the bloodstained air. 'Your mama did not tell you of her?'

"'Forgive me. But Mama did not often speak of this city. Or her mother. Or you.'

"The Baron's gaze fell at that. But rising to his feet, he lifted his goblet, the maidservant handing one each to Lachie, Baptiste, and me. My eyes drifted from her jugular to the Fool, still inspecting that damned cut on his finger. The bloodscent was stronger than the wine's perfume, my thirst writhing up my throat, spilling from my lips in a low, desperate growl.

"'Mesdames and messieurs,' the Baron called. 'Almighty God has seen fit to grant me seventy years beneath heaven, and not all have been bright. But even in darkness, by grace of the Angel Gabriel's promise to our ancestor, León yet stands as a beacon of the light. So on this my saintsday, let me offer toast to *you*! Who stand, where others have knelt! Who fight, where others have fallen! Let us drink to the King of Kings, to the Angel of Fire, but most, to you who would live for but *one day* as lions, and not lifetimes as lambs!'

"He raised his cup again.

"'Long live House de León!'

"'*Santé!*' came the cry.

"I downed my goblet in a single gulp, desperate to quench the inferno in my belly. Lachlan sipped the Baron's toast politely, but his troubled eyes were now fixed on me. He'd guessed months back that my thirst was worsening; the dread sangirè that in the end would claim him too. But I don't think he realized just how bad it was until that moment; to see me almost *completely* unmoored by the scent of a few drops of blood on the air.

"'Ye aright, brother?' he asked.

"But my eyes were fixed on my grandfather as he sat once more. The old man ignored my stare, raising his goblet to folk in the crowd, toasting his health and long life. But desperation was uncoiling through my veins along with my thirst now. I knew I'd be lucky to see my *next* saintsday, let alone my seventieth, and I'd no more time for courtesy.

"'Baron,' I hissed. 'My blade. Will you aid us in her mending?'

"The old man's voice ran cool as he sipped his wine. 'My forge burns night and day to keep my men armed and city safe, Chevalier. Why would I interrupt its workings for you?'

"'The whole empire will be safer when Fabién Voss is dead.'

"'They say no man of woman born can slay the Forever King.'

"I grabbed his wrist, my belly afire. 'I plan to test that theory.'

"My grandfather finally met my eyes then, snatching his hand back from my unasked-for touch. Charlotte tensed, a dozen guards reached for their blades. But with a gesture, the Baron held them still. He stared at me hard now, and though his face was lined with age, I swore I saw a hint of my mama in it. His back was straight despite his years, and in the iron of his gaze, I saw the same ferocity and pride she'd instilled in me.

"I clenched my jaw, desperation in my whisper.

"'*Please,* Grandfather.'

"The Baron looked to the silver signet on my finger.

"Up into my eyes.

"And nodding slow, he gave his answer.

"'My house is yours, Gabriel.'"

VIII

FORGEFIRE

“IT WAS THE scent that woke me, somewhere in the deep before dawn. Silverbell and blood, soft as candlesmoke, snaking its way down to my gut and digging in its teeth. But as I opened my eyes in that quiet night, my belly filled with oily ice.

“She stood at the foot of my bed, waif thin, silent as ghosts. Her skin was corpse pale, veiled in a ragged dress, dark as new midnight. Her face delicate as a doll’s, one hand reaching toward me. Hair black as her mama’s, eyes grey as my own, wide and limpid and fixed upon me as she whispered the word that broke my heart.

“‘*Papa.*’

“‘Patience.’

“‘*I can’t see. It’s dark here, Papa. It’s so dark and so cold.*’

“‘Oh, God…’

“‘*Why didn’t you protect me?* ’ Bloody tears spilled down her cheeks, dripping upon the floorboards. ‘*You promised to always protect me.*’

“‘I’m so sorry, baby. I *tried.*’

“A pattering began upon my skin, a soft drumbeat rising in tempo, the scent washing over me in waves. Her tears had become rain, I realized—raining *blood,* floods of crimson now sheeting down from the darkness above. It drenched my daughter through, drenched me too, thunder rocking the hidden skies. Patience called for me like she’d done as a child—crying in the night when the storms grew loud. I tried to reach her, clawing across my flooding bed, the song I’d sing to her echoing beneath the red tempest’s roar.

“*Sleep now, my lovely, sleep now, my dear,*

“*Dark dreams will fade now your papa is near.*

“*Fear not the monsters, fear not the n—*

“A dark shape loomed behind her, rising between the raindrops. I saw a porcelain smile, a long red coat, midnight-blue hair. I cried warning as Celene peeled her mask aside, revealing the awful features beneath. The skin on the lower half of her face and throat was torn away, her jaw naked bone, mouth brimming with razored teeth.

“‘Celene, *no*!’

“My sister pressed her hands upon my daughter’s shoulders, dead eyes fixed on mine as she hissed with all hell’s hatred.

“*‘By thisssss blood shall we have life eternal.’*

“I screamed as she opened her mouth, those fangs an endless multitude, filling all my horizons. But Celene’s throat bulged then, her jaw distending, dead eyes gone wide. And from the dark gulf of that dreadful maw spilled a *serpent,* long and red and sleek, scales glittering like rubies, and eyes of burning flame fixed upon mine.

“*‘GABRIEL,’* it whispered.

“*‘GABRIEL.’*

“‘Rise and shine, Chevalier!’

“The voice ripped me from darkness, the curtains of my boudoir yanked aside to let a shear of bloody light through the windows. A dim daysdeath sun had limped far above the horizon, a silhouette framed against its glow, dark tresses and pale skin, and for a moment I thought I’d dragged my sister back across the veil of dreaming.

“‘Come along, sleepyhead. The whole city awaits.’

“I frowned, heart athunder as my nightmare faded, realizing who the woman was.

“‘Mlle Odette…’

“‘Fairdawning, Chevalier.’ The maid chuckled. ‘Though dawn is long past, I fear.’

“I pushed my knuckles into my eyes, willing the awful remnants of that dream begone. Dragging a shaking hand back through my hair, I peered around the room, dimly remembering the events of the feast last night; the four bottles of wine I’d drowned my thirst with before retiring to the bedchamber my grandfather had gifted me. My boudoir was opulent, all mahogany and polished leather, an ornate four-poster bed big enough to lose a herd of sosya in at its heart. I sat up slow, wincing at the light.

“‘Seven Martyrs … What time is it?’

“‘Near noon.’ Mlle Odette shot me a teasing smile, binding back the curtains. ‘Good Frère Lachlan sent me to see if you were still breathing.’

“I groaned, pulse dimming, dream fading in the grim light of day. Yet still, that scent endured, that *blood,* beautiful, maddening, burning in my belly so bright and real I checked my skin to see if those red rains had drenched me true.

"And blinking up at the maidservant fussing at the drapes, revelation slowly dawned.

"Young Mlle Odette was in her moonstime.

"The thought sent an unwanted thrill along my skin, down my tingling spine, to land humming in my nethers. I closed my eyes against the sight of her, head still thumping from my bender, trying not to think how easy it would be to—

"'Come along, Chevalier, your comrades await.'

"The maid dragged my blankets aside, meaning to roust me from bed. A playful smile curled her lips, parting in a gasp as she realized I slept naked beneath. As she stammered apology, Odette's eyes drifted lower, a hot flush pinking her cheeks. The scent of her blood was filling the room, after all, and the state of me had grown somewhat…"

"Enthused?" Jean-François asked.

The Last Silversaint sipped his wine, abashed. "Quite."

"A rather rude awakening all around then."

Gabriel scoffed. "I certainly thought so. But as Odette saw what waited beneath those covers, she didn't look away as I'd have expected. Instead her gaze lingered, drinking in the inkwork on my skin, the scars and muscle, up, up to the eyes now watching her.

"'Do you mind?' I asked, brow raised.

"'… No,' she replied simply.

"'Will that be all, mademoiselle?' I asked, scowling now.

"'If it please you.' Dark eyes pierced mine, her scent kissing my tongue. My gaze flickered to her throat, adorned with a black silk choker and a locket of gold.

"'It *would* please me,' I growled. 'Au revoir, Mlle Odette.'

"'Au revoir, Chevalier.'

"With a perfect curtsey, Odette slipped from my boudoir, azure dress rustling like old summer leaves. I could smell her still, hear her pulse, quickening as she poked her head back through the doorway, glancing to the golden bell at my bedside table.

"'Ring if you've a need.'"

Jean-François tutted, turning a new leaf in his tome. "Thirsty little *strumpet.*"

"I've told you before, Historian. Folk are drawn to the darkness within palebloods. Just as they're drawn to the vampires who made us. Some loathe us, others adore us, but none ignore us. And not to strum my own lute, but I *was* something of a legend."

"Still. The good mademoiselle was carrying on rather shamelessly, oui?"

“You’re one to fucking talk, vampire.”

“I am actually,” the historian said, smoothing down the page.

“You hold flesh cheap as water,” Gabriel scowled. “You gave Dario to me last night. Offered me Meline, too. You’ve doubtless bedded every thrall who serves you, and you’d gladly offer them *all* to me if you thought you’d have a chance to watch. Or join in.”

The Marquis chuckled.

“You sound like my mother. But you *are* mistaken in one respect. For while I am indeed a *hopeless* hedonist, I’ve no shame about it at all.”

Jean-François dipped his quill, tapped the golden nib upon the bottle’s lip.

“… That offer still stands, by the way.”

Gabriel gritted his teeth, sipping his wine. Jean-François’s gaze drifted to the sliver of light beneath the cell door. The shadow of the woman lurking outside.

“Thirsty?”

“I emerged a little after noon,” the silversaint continued. “Fresh shaven and well scrubbed after months of endless mud. Lachie was downstairs, Charlotte pacing beside him, her eye meeting mine as I descended the grand stair. My cousin was yet attired like a warrior, long frockcoat cut in a feminine style, breeches not skirts, her hair spilling down to the floor. Her brow was still marked with ashes, and she held a long bundle, wrapped in oilcloth.

“I nodded. ‘Godmorrow, Dame de León.’

“‘Half the day is gone,’ Charlotte scowled. ‘I was beginning to think you dead.’

“‘I can feel your disappointment from here.’

“‘Quite a celebration last night, brother,’ Lachie smiled. ‘How’s the head?’

“‘Still on my shoulders.’ I glanced to my cousin and took a sip from my hipflask; last of the liquor cabinet upstairs. ‘You’re escorting us to La Forge de San Javon?’

“Charlotte nodded, handing over the bundle. ‘M. Sa-Ismael is already there.’

“Unwrapping the oilcloth, I saw it was Ashdrinker, snug inside her beaten scabbard. We’d not spoken in days and I drew her slow, wondering if I’d be greeted by songs or screams. But her voice echoed in my head, silver, soft as if with sleep.

“*Godmorrowmorrowmorrow, Gabriel …*

“‘Fairdawning, Ash. All well?’

“*All is beautifulfulfulful, my friend.*

“‘We’re taking you to the forge now. Baptiste will make you whole.’ I made to slide her back into her sheath. ‘You’ll feel better soon, I promise.’

“*Nono, quench me not aready. We do notnotnot talk anymore, m-m-my friend. The sun is shining. The host is singing. Walk with me as once we did in halls of* *light and love.*

"'As it please.' Brow quirked, I glanced to Charlotte. 'Lead on, Mlle de León.'

"Lachie and I followed as my cousin marched through the château, past lion's livery and suits of beautiful platemail, out to the gatehouse at the keep's rear. A broad roadway cut in long switchbacks down the cliffside, leading to the city below. The daysdeath light was grim, the air humid as a trencherman's codpiece, but still, León was a sight to behold. The port was warehouses and tavernes and a long boardwalk, a fleet of fishing boats rocking in her piers, a stern fort bristling with cannon overlooking dark waters. But I noted most of the buildings along the water's edge were new, the limestone around the city center darker in patches—still stained from when my cousin had burned those vampire broods to ashes.

"Ashdrinker was singing a hymn in my head as Charlotte led us down the cliffroad and through the noble quarter, folk bustling about their affairs. If not for the churlsilver and braids of maidens' hair at the windows, the fonts of holy water at every door, León might've almost been a city from a time before the sun failed us. But on every corner hung an iron gibbet, scribed with the crime of the corpse therein—*heretic, wytch, idolator*—and patrols of gens d'armes roamed the streets, brows marked with ash, mechwork crossbows at their backs. Unlike in Redwatch, I saw no refugees of war-torn provinces, no beggars. And I fancied the faint scent of cinders hung in the air as Charlotte led us down a broad boulevard toward the marvel in the city's heart.

"The great cathedral of León.

"'Le Dôme,' Lachie breathed, making the sign of the wheel. 'Sweet Mothermaid.'

"'Hell of a sight,' I agreed.

"*B-b-b-blasphemy, my friend …*

"A circular monolith of marble and stained glass, surrounded by seven spires that touched the sky. Its arched entryways loomed thirty feet tall, dawndoors to the east and duskdoors west. They were wrought of bronze, corroded green with long years, embossed with a motif of the wars of heaven—the Empyrean Host battling the Fallen legions. But though Le Dôme was a masterpiece, it was near overshadowed by the marvel outside it.

"I'd heard tell in my travels, but never thought to lay eyes upon it myself. Le Chemin des Anges, they named it—The Angel Way—a tribute from the sculptor Alfonse de Merangais, wrought near a century ago. Twenty-seven figures, towering in stature, stood on a broad stone boulevard that encircled the cathedral, guarding it from all harm.

"They were stunningly beautiful, great wings folded at their backs, sigils in their hands; Eloise with her sword and shield, Chiara with her blindfold and scale, Evangeline with her wreath of flowers. Grim Mahné with his scythes, Raphael with his book, and of course Gabriel, patron of this city, his flaming sword held aloft to heaven. After all I'd seen, there was no love left in my heart for the Almighty, nor his legions neither. But still, I found my breath stolen from my lungs at the sight of them.

"I looked up at my namesake, at once struck by the notion his visage seemed … familiar. I couldn't place when, nor where, yet gazing up at that beautiful statue, I was struck with certainty I'd seen it before. Charlotte's eyes were affixed upon Gabriel too, fingers pressed to the flaming sword pinned above her heart, and I recalled Mathieu's tale of how she'd earned her name. I'd no illusions an angel had *actually* appeared to her in this cathedral, urging her to burn the corruption from this city's heart. But God knows I was no one to look askance at others for the tricks the mind can play on those in mourning.

"*Gavrael.*

"I looked down as my blade spoke, silver eyes fixed on the angel above.

"*Looks nothing like h-h-him.*

"'Come.' Charlotte bowed to the statue in farewell. 'The forge is this way.'

"Down long thoroughfares we walked, through kiss of salt and stink of fish, into the trades district. People cast curious glances our way, mothers, marketeers, and merchants, looking at me and Lachie with awe. But not a *one* of them met my cousin's eye as she approached, and many hissed as she passed, spitting over their shoulders or making the sign of the wheel. Charlotte ignored them all, chin held high as she led us to a mighty stone building on the edge of a large square. A statue of Eloise with her sword and shield stood guard outside, anvil song and woodsmoke kissed the air, reminding me at once of my stepfather's forge in Lorson; my sister and me playing soldiers as the sun sank below the horizon, fighting back-to-back against invisible legions.

"*Ever outnumbered,* we'd say. *Never outmatched. Always Lions.*

"Memory of my nightmare rose unbidden then; those grinning teeth, that red serpent emerging between them. I'd dreamed of Celene almost every night since I'd drunk her blood in Cairnhaem, but that snake was something new …

"'Gabe!'

"The cry pulled me from reverie, back into the dim light of day. Baptiste was striding from the building, dark eyes alight with joy. A handsome fellow about Baptiste's age walked beside him, shaven head and bright blue gaze, the skin on his hands and muscular forearms bearing the telltale burn scars of a fellow blackthumb.

"'Fairdawning, brother.' I nodded to the big man. 'What news?'

"'Gabe, it's *astonishing,*' Baptiste said, almost giddy as he waved to the foundry at his back. 'They use a form of convection to capture the heat, *concentrate* it upon itself. But the forge is fashioned such that less temperature is wasted to the air, less fuel used in the firing, God Almighty, it’s *incredible*.’

“The man beside Baptiste chuckled, thumbing sweat from his brow. His skin was a rich olive, his smile bright against the charcoal smeared across his face. ‘Merci, M. Sa-Ismael. High praise from a blackthumb of San Michon.”

“‘Gabe, Lachie, this is M. Cortez,’ Baptiste said. ‘Forgemaster of León.’

“‘Fernando, please. We don’t stand much on ceremony here.’

“‘You bloody well should.’ Baptiste shook his head. ‘The mechwork bows carried by the city’s soldiery, the flaming blade wielded by Mlle Charlotte, the guns on the bay, *all* of your design.’ He glanced to me, eyes bright. ‘I’ve seen the work of masters before, brother. And I don’t use the word lightly. But this man is a genius.’

“‘High praise indeed,’ I nodded. ‘Well met, monsieur.’

“I shook Cortez’s hand, his grip strong and honest, Lachie doing the same. León’s forgemaster looked now to my cousin, his gaze lingering on the ash at her brow.

“‘La Lionne Cendrée.’

“‘M. Cortez,’ she replied, not meeting his eyes. ‘Fairdawning.’

“He motioned to her blade. ‘Lightbringer serves well on your hunts?’

“‘She serves fine. Though her chamber is dry. Have I your leave to visit the stores to replenish her?’

“‘Of course, mademoiselle. I’ll have one of my lads—’

“‘I know the way, M. Cortez.’ Charlotte nodded to us, curt and cold. ‘Au revoir, Frère á Craeg. Chevalier. I leave you in capable hands.’

“My cousin spun on her heel, stalking into the foundry. I saw apprentices scurrying aside at her approach, more muttered curses as she passed by, Charlotte paying heed to none of it. Lachlan watched her leave, his voice gone wistful.

“‘They scorn her. Though she saved them all.’

“‘But at what cost, good Frère?’

“Lachie glanced to the forgemaster as he spoke, his green eyes gone hard. Fernando cleared his throat, looking to me.

“‘I’m told you’ve a patient for me, Chevalier?’

“‘Oui.’ I lifted my sword, addressing the dame on the hilt. ‘Ash, this is M. Cortez. He and Baptiste are going to help you. You mind your tongue while in his keeping, oui?’

“*There once was a m-maid from Ardunn,*
“*Who had a remarkable tongue.*
“*With angelic grace,*
“*She’d sit on your f-face,*
“*Yet m-m-manage to tickle your—*

“‘Come now, behave yourself, oui?’

“‘Seven Martyrs…’ Fernando whispered. ‘The Ashdrinker. I’ve heard a dozen legends of her, but not once thought to see her with my own eyes…'

"'Be warned, she's out of sorts of late. But if you can mend her, monsieur, the Black Lion of Lorson will be forever in your debt.'

"The smith took Ashdrinker with all the reverence due a holy relic, eyes glittering as they roamed the blade. But his gaze grew clouded as it reached her tip; the hairline crack that now even I could see, traveling ever closer to her hilt.

"'What say you, M. Cortez?' I asked, chest aching. 'Can you see her right?'

"'I can *try*, but…' The blackthumb's eyes filled with wonder as he looked to the blade in his hands. 'She … sweet Mothermaid, she *speaks* to me, Chevalier.'

"'Better than screaming. But pay no heed to the insults she might gift your mama.' I smiled wryly, glanced to Baptiste. 'Can I trust you to look after her for me, brother?'

"'Of course.' The big man looked wistfully to the building behind us, the forgemaster at his side. 'And with pleasure. I've never worked a foundry such as this. Though my master was one of the finest smiths in Elidaen, M. Cortez can teach me a thing or two, I wager.'

"'Fernando, please. And I'd be honored for your help. But we'd best get started. It shall take all my skill to see this beauty right.'

"Without more ado, the blackthumbs turned back to the foundry, speaking in excited tones. The scent of smelter and coke, the hymn of anvil and hammer—those reminders of my childhood brought a strange sense of comfort, and looking to Lachlan, I found myself smiling. God knows we'd seen our trials these last few months, and I'd no idea what awaited us in the city of my forebears. But we'd found unexpected welcome, smithcraft that could help us with our woes. My hand drifted to my sleeve, the vial of blood secreted there, the knowledge of what I must do with it filling me with fire. Soon enough we'd be on the road again after our prey, and vengeance seemed closer than ever."

Gabriel paused in his tale, swallowing the last of his goblet, licking slow at his lips. His leathers creaked as he leaned forward to pour himself another, crimson spilling onto gold as the wine's perfume blushed the air. Jean-François lifted chocolat eyes.

"Why do I have the gnawing suspicion all this was happening too easily, Gabriel? That things were going *far* too well?"

"Because they were, coldblood."

The Last Silversaint shook his head and sighed.

"Because they fucking *were*."

IX

BLOOD IS BLOOD

“IT HAD BEEN twelve years, nine months, and sixteen days since I’d been to church.

“I could still remember that day, clear as the sun had once shone—Aaron walking at my side through the dawndoors of Aveléne’s little chapel, the troth ring Baptiste had wrought cupped in my sweating palm. The choir singing, my heart brimming, and an angel waiting at the altar with a smile that promised forever.

“And then forever’s king had taken it away.

“Standing there in the grand cathedral of León, I could taste bile in the back of my throat. I gazed up at the statue of the Redeemer upon his wheel, captured at the moment of his death. Hands and feet nailed down. Throat cut wide and brow crowned with barbs. He’d been a conqueror in life, spreading his One Faith at the edge of a sword. Betrayed at the last by those he held most dear. But despite the suffering he’d endured, I could think only of the suffering he’d gifted *us*. That tomb beneath Maergenn. Those five statues gathered around God’s son, fanged mouths open and screaming as he cursed them with eternity.

“Our so-called savior had damned all of us to hell, and I’d rather have been pissing glass than standing in that hall. But as my cousin said, duskmass was compulsory in the City of Lions, and after the favor I’d been shown, I’d decided not to push my luck by being a snot.

“The place was *thronged* with people, wealthy among the pews, commonfolk in the aisles, the rush of their pulses like the song of the sea in my head. Odette stood among members of my grandfather's house, and though the scent of her moonsblood gripped me with hands of burning iron, I stood silently with Lachie and Baptiste in the place of honor we'd been accorded. The Testaments had been spoken, the nobility offered a sip of sacramental wine with the promise *By this blood shall we know life eternal.* My brothers had drunk, but I'd refused of course; worried I'd choke on the hypocrisy.

"And then Bishop Santiago had launched into his homily.

"'I wish to speak of love.'

"The old man stood at the pulpit, the Redeemer hung overhead. A huge curved window of stained glass rose at his back, glittering red and gold in the light of the white altar candles—an image of Angel Gabriel, wings outspread as if to cloak the bishop in flame. Santiago was elderly, but his eyes were undimmed by time, his voice musical and more, *powerful.* Le Dôme's acoustics were miraculous, the bishop's words reverberating off the ceiling above, the curved walls around, layered upon itself as if not one but a *multitude* spoke, and seemingly everywhere at once.

"'The highest goal to which we can aspire. The truth beyond truth. The most precious gift our heavenly Father *ever* gave us was the capacity to love. Love is the tie that binds us. The anchor that moors us. The wind that allows us to fly. What miracle is greater than a soldier's love of his brother, a husband for his wife, a parent for their child?'

"The bishop paused, leaning upon a great gold-trimmed copy of the Testaments.

"'No sin is love. No sin can come *of* it, for no evil can be born of that which is divine. Love is the cure for all suffering. The balm for all pain. The answer to every question worth asking. Love is forgiveness. Love is acceptance. And though all earthly joy must fade, your love shall be resurrected in the kingdom of the Father, and live with him in paradise.'

"The old man's pale blue eyes met mine.

"'Forever.'

"Santiago smiled, arms outstretched to the congregation.

"'Seek love. Accept love. Cherish love. Go now, my children, and love one another, and live in faithful service of the Lord.'

"'Véris,' came the response from the crowd.

"The bishop made the sign of the wheel, and all in the cathedral followed suit save me. The choir took up its song to mark the end of mass, the congregation began to take their leave. It seemed some spell had been cast upon them by Santiago's homily, and though I rankled at the thought I'd been excommunicated for love, still a piece of my twice-broke heart felt buoyed up by the old man's words.

"I thought again of my Astrid then. My beautiful Patience. The joy they'd brought me, the *blessing* they'd been. And for the first time in as long as I could recall, as I rose to depart, I found myself smiling at their memory.

"'Chevalier.'

"The murmur was soft, but cut like a headsman's blade. I looked to my grandfather, yet on his knees, eyes upon the Redeemer's statue above us.

"'I would speak with you.'

"I shared a glance with Baptiste, a nod with Lachlan, and my brothers made their way up the aisle. It took an age for the cathedral to empty, my grandfather genuflecting all the while. But finally, we were alone; the old man yet on his knees, and I staring up at the son of the God I'd never kneel for again.

"I unscrewed the cap of my hipflask, sighing as I found it empty.

"'You are well served by Forgemaster Cortez?'

"I looked to my grandfather, rising now to his feet. Again, I was struck at the thought of how well he'd aged; broad of shoulder and firm of hand. He must have been a fearsome warrior in youth—he and Emperor Alexandre had been swordbrothers years past, scourging the pirate kings of Asheve from the Eversea. I couldn't help but see a part of him in my mama, and thus in me, and I was heartsick and indignant that he'd cast her away.

"*What might we have been,* I wondered, *if you'd but loved me?*

"'M. Cortez has smithcraft like I've never seen. I am well served, Baron. Merci.'

"My grandfather nodded, making the sign of the wheel. And with hands clasped, he walked slowly up to the altar. His greatcoat was long, black, embroidered with golden lions, and his seeming was kingly as he looked upon the son of God.

"'When will you depart on your hunt?'

"'As soon as Cortez and Baptiste's work is done.'

"'You know where your quarry might be found?'

"'East of the Vipère. North of the Ranger. Beyond that, I'm unsure.'

"'We received word months back of your prey.'

"My grandfather proffered a note, sealed by the unicorn of House Augustin. In years past, that wax would've been imperial yellow, but with no flowers left to stain it, the seal was white as doves, pale against the gold rings adorning his hand.

"'Fabién Voss has taken Isabeau,' he said. 'He pierced the city gates, and slaughtered all therein, adding yet more bodies to his Endless Legion. He will surely turn to San Maximille when winter falls again, and beyond the Shield of Augustin, the capital itself.'

"My belly rolled at this news; Voss had already advanced farther south than I might've hoped, and we were still months from his heels.

"'Then why have you not marched to the Emperor's aid? You're his trothbrother.'

“The Baron scoffed. ‘Alexandre III is dead, Gabriel. My oaths died with him.’

“‘*Dead? ’* I whispered, belly rolling. ‘How? *When?*’

“‘Blacklung. Three months back. Isabella sits as Empress alone.’ He scowled, glancing to the note. ‘Although young Prince Philippe certainly writes as if his royal backside were already planted on the Fivefold Throne.’

“‘Still, Grandfather, you’ve an army here. Weapons of wonder from your forge. If Voss takes Augustin, how long until he turns—’

“‘I have my own walls to keep. This city is a jewel, coveted by every bloodlord in Elidaen, and our domains are riven with rotting Dead. I am hard-pressed to defend my own lands, let alone House Augustin’s.’ He squared his shoulders, gazing at that angel of stained glass and fire. ‘I had hoped … you might defend them with me.’

“He breathed deep, looking at me with my mama’s eyes.

“‘And one day, *instead* of me.’

“I blinked at that, scowling. ‘… Meaning what?’

“‘My sons are dead. Not for men to ken the mind of God. But in his ineffable wisdom, heaven’s king has left me without an heir.’

“I shook my head, almost floored with the realization of what he was asking.

“‘What … what about Charlotte?’

“‘You cousin is brave. Bold. Of that, there be no doubt.’ He glanced to the flickering candles. ‘But it would be unwise to give Charlotte rule of a city she near incinerated.’

“‘You threw my mother into the cold,’ I spat, stalking toward him. ‘You sent not a single letter, nor solitary fucking coin. Auriél de León died in the mud you left her in, and now you ask me to rule when you’re gone? Her halfbreed? Her *bastard?*’

“The Baron lifted a parcel of parchment from his greatcoat and tossed it onto the floor. Letters, I realized. Bound with red ribbon and set with his seal. Dozens of them.

“‘All returned unopened,’ he said. ‘Unread. I *begged* my daughter to return, Gabriel. But hubris has ever been the bane of our famille. I set it aside now, in begging *you* this.’

“I met his eyes, saw the anger and sorrow etched in those black depths.

“‘No matter your sire, you are blood of my blood. A hero of the people. I know I look it not, but I am *old,* Gabriel. And in my dreams of late, I have seen you.’ He gestured to the stained-glass window, that angel and his burning blade. ‘Standing with your namesake behind you, wings enfolding you, his sword in your hand as you take your place upon the throne of your forebears. As long as a de León holds God’s faith upon its throne, the City of Lions *cannot* fall. So the Angel Gabriel promised us. So it has ever been.’

“I knew not what to make of this. Where *any* of it came from. But I shook my head, cleaving to the star that had guided me this far. 'I have a promise to keep. A king to kill.'

"My grandfather reached into his greatcoat again, producing a thin book, bound in old leather. The sigil of our house was embossed upon the cover beside the initials *A.L.*

"'What's that?' I demanded.

"'A journal. Your mother's. Detailing the nights before she departed this city. The nights she met your father. The nights she learned she was pregnant with you.'

"I reached for the tome, heart quickening. But the Baron drew it out of reach.

"'Think upon my offer, son. I shall gift you this when you gift me answer.' He tucked the journal away, searching my eyes. 'She was a beautiful girl, your mama. A fierce and faithful girl. But above all, a *prideful* girl was my Auriél. I see that part of her in you. Do not allow it to blind you, Gabriel. Past is passed. And blood is blood.'

"My grandfather touched my cheek, dark eyes burning. I didn't flinch away. I could see his regret for years gone. His wish that things might be different in years to come. But with no more words, the old man strode up the aisle, flanked by gens d'armes as he departed into the night. I stood before that altar for a silent age, staring at my namesake, stained-glass wings spread, sword ablaze. It seemed the air fell chill then, hair prickling on the back of my neck, whispers too soft to hear echoing in the rafters.

"*GABRIEL.*

"Scowling, I stalked up the aisle. Most of me was angered, indignant—at the thought I might simply forget my mother's suffering. But as I reached the threshold, I heard those words again; the words Santiago had spoken in his homily, echoing up the nave behind me.

"*Love is forgiveness. Love is acceptance. Seek love. Accept love. Cherish love.*

"'Did he ask you?'

"I turned at the voice, spotting my cousin in the gloom. Charlotte was stood in an alcove beside a statue of San Javon, black clad, her face pallid in the darkness. She adjusted the leather patch across her eye, dragging long hair from her lips as she pressed.

"'Did Grandfather ask you to rule?'

"'If he did? Would you be looking to set my bedsheets ablaze?'

"My cousin glowered, mouth pressed thin. But I only scoffed in turn.

"'Have no fear, Charlotte. I've no want of it. Now or ever.'

"'You should accept.'

"'What would the brothel troubadours sing of me then, I wonder?'

"'I mean it. After all, there's no chance for me. Not La Lionne Cendrée.' She smiled bitterly, the burn scars on her face twisting. 'You've seen the way commonfolk look at me. Heard them whisper at my back. You think they'd accept me on the throne? She, who burned their babies in their beds? You think there's a reason why I'm out hunting mongrels in bordertowns at Grandfather's behest, rather than sitting at his side?'

"I looked her up and down, speaking from the heart.

"'I think the soldiers you lead would follow you into the abyss if you asked. I think small people feel the need to talk, even when they've no clue what they're talking *about*. I think you gave more for this city than most will ever know.'

"Her mask slipped a moment at that, and as she looked back into the cathedral, I saw the rage in her, bright as the fires she'd once lit on this city's skin.

"'You know, when Angel Gabriel appeared to me that day, he asked, *Do you love your city enough to die for it?* I told him yes. Of course I did.' She clenched her jaw, the scent of ashes in her hair. 'He never told me what it would be like to *live* for it afterward.'

"I took a step toward her, perhaps to offer comfort, but with a snarl Charlotte turned on her heel, stalking off into the darkness. I followed slower, meandering around the Angel Way, up the cliffside road, thoughts all raging in my head. Finally reaching the château, I turned back to look upon the city of my forebears, Grandfather's offer ringing in my ears.

"I'd be lying if I said part of me wasn't tempted—the part who still remembered that squalid little village, that bastard who grew up with nothing. But most of me knew it was vain fantasy. My future held no thrones nor lordly titles, but a rising thirst, a budding madness, and if I was lucky, a promise kept before I filled a shallow grave. I whispered it now, eyes turned to the bottomless black above.

"'Fabién…'

"*'Get OUT! '*

"The cry hung faint on the air; not so distant a paleblood couldn't hear it. I spun about as a crash rang from the forecourt. The *stables*.

"'Aaron…'

"I ran, skirting the château, silvered heels pounding the cobbles as an alarm bell split the night. I reached the forecourt in time to see a water barrel come hurtling through the stable wall, shattered timbers falling like rain as Aaron roared again.

"*'I said get OUT! '*

"The guards about the stable cried alarm, warning ringing across the battlements. Spears had been raised, torches lit, and I saw Lieutenant Mathieu emerging from the guardhouse, bellowing with blade drawn. I was off, running toward the big man, set to stop him before anyone did anything rash. Soldiers were gathering around the gaping hole in the stable wall, burning crossbows raised as a pale figure emerged, greatcoat flowing about him like evening mist, golden hair tumbling down the marble of his skin.

"'Messieurs.' Aaron bowed, straightening his cravat. 'Apologies for my outburst.'

"A second figure shouldered past Aaron—Baptiste, buckling his belt as he stormed into the courtyard. Looking to his throat, I saw his collar loosed but skin unmarred, guessing the tale in an instant—he'd come to his beloved after mass, offering his blood again. And with a strength I was growing to envy, Aaron had again told him no.

"I reached for my brother as he strode toward me. 'Baptiste—'

"'Get your hands off me, Gabriel,' he spat, snatching his arm away.

"'Peace, now. I only meant to ask … are you well?'

"'Am I well? With my own fucking husband *terrified to touch me*?'

"'Brother—'

"But my friend would hear no more, stomping past me and into the château. I looked to Lieutenant Mathieu, to his men, burning mechwork bows and glittering steel. All were unnerved, eyes drifting to the barrel smashed like kindling across the stone.

"'Might I have a word with my esteemed colleague, Lieutenant?'

"The big man scowled, glancing at the shattered wall. 'Be swift, Chevalier.'

"I nodded thanks, moving slow past the soldiers so as not to spook them further. Aaron had drifted back out of sight, and stepping through the hole he'd torn, I admit even my hackles were raised. What few horses remained in my grandfather's stocks were gathered at the stable's rear, looking just as nervous as I. Searching the gloom, I imagined a monster flashing from the shadows, fangs glinting and claws outstretched.

"'I'm sorry you had to see that.'

"'I glanced up, spied Aaron sitting on the rafters overhead. He'd jumped there, I supposed, feet now dangling over the edge, strangely boyish in seeming. He was holding a thin circlet of gold, lifting it now to his eye, peering at me through its heart.

"*His troth ring.*

"'What are you planning to do with that?' I asked.

"'I honestly don't know.'

"Aaron hung his head, sighing.

"'How much longer must we linger here, Gabriel?'

"'Baptiste and Forgemaster Cortez are at work. Hopefully not long.'

"'Something runs ill in this city. Some fell shadow I know not the shape of, yet *feel* all the same. Baptiste is not himself. His blood runs high. And *hot*.' Aaron tilted his head, eyes narrowed. 'You seem different, too. I hear it in your veins. Smell it on your skin.'

"'… How long since you fed, brother?'

"Aaron moved then, a flash of gold and midnight blue, down from the rafters to stand but an inch from my face. I flinched, hand snaking toward the blade that wasn’t there, wondering if it came to it, would I be able to—

“‘I would be gone from here, Gabriel.’

“‘We’re working at it. Meantime, you might consider hunting in the countryside. There’s wretched aplenty, and starving yourself here only risks you losing control.’

“‘I will not leave my love in this place alone.’ Blue eyes drifted over my throat, my skin prickling as Aaron leaned close, whispering. ‘Evil dwells in the House of Lions.’

“‘Evil? There’s holy water at every door. The city takes mass every eve. You don’t think you’re being paranoid? You’ve not fed in fucking *days,* and you and Baptiste are obv—’

“‘Let me worry about mending my marriage. *You* just mend your damned blade.’

“Aaron moved then, flashing up to the rafters so swift he was near a blur. And there he sat again, feet dangling over the edge, arms wrapped tight around his belly.

“‘Pleasant dreams,’ he hissed.

“I sighed at that, knowing vampires couldn’t dream as mortals did. One more thing lost. One more thing taken. But looking at Aaron’s hand, my eyes lingered on the black heart and thorns burned into his skin. Ever would he bear that scar, I knew. The memory of the sins he’d committed in that devil’s service his constant company. And I couldn’t help but think of his words in the woods then, his time beneath the Blackheart’s boot.

“*I enjoyed it, Gabriel.*

“*I* reveled *in it.*

“‘Bonsoir, brother,’ I murmured.

“I stepped back into the forecourt, gesturing to Mathieu that all was well, despite it being nothing close. My grandfather’s offer, the altercation with Charlotte, now Aaron’s warning—all had me keener than ever to put this place behind us. I felt soldiers staring as I walked to the château, climbing the grand stair now, eager for solitude.

“But as I reached my bedchamber, I found it not as empty as I’d hoped.

“‘Mlle Odette…’

“The maidservant stood beside my bed, plumping my pillows. She was clad in blue again, but her gown was a different style; a daring low-cut bodice, a tumble of skirts beneath. She curtseyed, hands clasped like a scolded child.

“‘Forgive me, Chevalier. I’m late in turning down your bed.’

“‘It’s fine, mademoiselle, I’ve no need of your service this night.’

“‘I’ll not be long, I vow it.’ Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘But I’ve brought you a gift by way of apology for my tardiness.’

“My protest died as the maid gestured to three new bottles sitting atop the armoire—green glass, white wax seals, the sigil of House de León embossed upon the label.

"'I saw your liquor cabinet was empty,' she smiled.

"I sighed, my tongue ashen. 'Now you're singing my song, mademoiselle.'

"Her smile deepened—something less conspiratorial, and more outright wicked. Odette whisked past me in a flurry of long black curls and azure silk, over to the bottles. I caught the scent of her moonsblood again, thirst setting my veins afire as she cracked the wax seal. Eager to drown it, I searched the mantle, the cabinets, the war chest.

"'Are there any bloody goblets in this room?' I hissed.

"'Why bother? You can drink right from the neck.'

"I turned as Odette spoke, smoke-soft, her smile vanishing as she lifted the wine to her lips. I tell you, I was *hypnotized,* Historian. Watching as she swallowed, fire stirring in me, hot waves flooding my spine, the beast in me now roused and pacing behind its bars.

"'I think it best you say godmorrow, mademoiselle.'

"Odette lowered the bottle, running a wine-red tongue over her lips. 'T'would be a shame to leave a vintage like this wanting, Chevalier.'

"My fangs were grown long in my gums now, my cock stone-hard in my leathers, and for a moment, it was all I could do to swallow the growl seething up my throat.

"'I said *leave.*'

"'I heard you.' Odette's gaze drifted below my belt. 'But it seems not all of you wants me to.' She stepped closer, her scent flooding my mouth as her eyes met mine. 'I've heard the songs they sing about you, Lion. Do you not wish to lie among my leaves?'

"I swallowed hard, the air so thick with her it was difficult to breathe. The beast within me roared, thrashing, *crashing* against its bars. Jaw clenched so tight my teeth were creaking, I reached out slow, my hand closing around the bottle as I hissed.

"*'Leave.'*

"Odette's pupils were swollen with want, breath hitching. But lowering her gaze, she backed off. And reaching the doorway, she glanced to the bell beside the bed.

"'Ring if you've a need.'

"I slammed the door as she left, squeezing my temples to stop the tempest of my pulse. Though Odette was gone, her scent lingered, and lifting the wine, I drank without pause, red rivulets running down my throat and soaking my shirt through. Turning to the mantel, I snatched up the next bottle, snapping off the neck in my impatience to down it. I gulped from the broken throat, no God to pray to, no son to beg forgiveness from, alone in the dark with that beast in my head.

"Laughing at me.

"I withered to the floorboards, lips shredded on broken glass, dragging the final bottle with me. My belly was roiling, hand shaking as I dug my thumb into white wax, prying away the seal. And I drank, wretched, trembling, brought close to puking in my haste to drown that monster in my belly, to kill it before it killed me. I know not when I passed out, the line between light and dark and laughing and weeping blurred somewhere in the depths of my wine-addled mind. But I knew I was dreaming when I heard her voice.

"'*Gabriel.*'

"A hiss, whip-cruel, cutting at my skin. And opening eyes gummed shut with blood, I looked upon her, staring down at me, her gaze boiling with hatred. My sister Celene, swathed in crimson, jagged jaw and glittering teeth.

"'*You failed me.*'

"A slender hand gestured, the shadows about me rolling, three pale figures now coalescing out of the dream-deep dark. My angels all, Astrid and Patience and poor, sweet Dior, arms entwined, eyes sightless, dirt spilling from their mouths as they spoke.

"'*You failed us.*'

"Celene lowered her chin, snarling.

"'*And you failed—*'

"But her voice halted then, cracking at the edges, the shadow at her back now cut with a golden shear of light. *Fire,* I realized. A figure surrounded by it, *wrought* of it, rising at my sister's back like the dawns before daylight died. Celene's hair curled, her skin blackened as that figure flung its pinions wide. And as she was engulfed in flame, I heard a voice, reverberating on the arched ceiling above, the curved walls around, layered upon itself as if not one but a *multitude* spoke, and seemingly everywhere at once.

"'*GABRIEL.*'

"Consuming.

"Purifying.

"Flame.

"'*GABRIEL.*'"

X

THE OFFERING

"I WOKE WELL after noon the next day, body aching, tongue swollen. My night had been miserable, the images I'd seen in my drunken dreams wouldn't leave my mind, thumping in time with the sledgehammers in my skull. It seemed some storm raged in my head; louder than my rising thirst, the ache of my hangover. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw them: my sister, ma famille, dear Dior, consumed by those flames.

"I knew what none of it meant. Only that I wanted to be gone from this place. The scent of sour wine hung on my breath, my skin, but my first thought as I dragged my sorry carcass out of bed was to check the liquor cabinet. And finding it inevitably, tragically empty, I washed my face and went in search of something to fill me.

"The keep was bustling; no surprise considering how late I'd woken. Pipe clenched between my teeth, I prowled grand hallways and staterooms in search of a drop. I passed through the feasting hall, a library, fonts filled with holy water, stumbling at last upon a heavy door with a dozen guards in dark livery outside it.

"I sized up the tallest; a youngblood with black hair and fuzz on his cheeks.

"'Is this where my grandfather keeps the liquor?'

"The guard kept his eyes forward, jaw set. 'No, Chevalier.'

"I squinted over his shoulder, breathing red smoke. The door was ironwood, bound with fat bands of steel—heavy enough that even *I'd* have trouble breaking it open. ‘Well, there’s *something* valuable in there. A stash of dreamweed, mayhaps? Deeds to the château? A collection of particularly naughty Elidaeni lithographs?’

“‘This is the armory, Chevalier. The wine cellar is below the kitchens.’ The youngblood nodded farther down the hall. ‘That way.’

“I thumped his shoulder, eliciting a wince, though from my breath or strength, I know not. ‘Your blood’s worth fucking *smoking,* boy.’

“The lad blanched, but I wandered on, at last stumbling into the keep kitchens. Here again was a rush of activity; evemeal preparations underway by a bevy of sweat-slick maids. They nodded godmorrow, and thinking of her offer last night, I looked briefly for Odette among them. I’d no appetite at all, chewing a rind of spudloaf and trying not to puke. But at the kitchen’s rear, I spotted twin doors and stone stairs leading down, down, down.

“The wine cellar was dark, cool, vast. Rows of wooden shelves ran its length, bottles of dusty green sealed with faded red wax, lions illustrated upon the labels. Despite the wealth on display upstairs, here at last I found some sign of the apocalypse beyond León’s walls, for though this larder might once have brimmed with booze, only a few hundred bottles remained. The other racks were stocked with provisions: dried mushrooms and smoked fish, sack upon sack of fucking potatoes.

“I heard movement among the shelves, glass clinking and rustling silk, thinking once more of Odette. But rounding the corner, I found company more unwelcome.

“My grandfather’s Fool.

“He wore his faded motley and jester’s face, red smeared across his mouth in parody of a smile as he filled a hessian sack with bottles of Vin de León.

“‘Thirsty, M. Caspién?’

“The Fool started as I spoke, bottle slipping his grip. I moved to grab it, but the idiot managed to catch it himself; quick as he’d juggled those knives at my grandfather’s feast. Sighing, he pressed one hand to his heart.

“‘Seven Martyrs, you frightened the life out of me.’

“The Fool took a deep breath to calm himself, managed to find a smile.

“‘Fairdawning, Chevalier. A pleasure to see you again.’

“‘I’m sure it is.’ I glanced around the racks, down to the hessian sack of wine, and back up to his eyes. I said nothing else; letting silence ask for me.

“‘My lord asked me to fetch him a bottle,’ Caspién declared.

“‘Or six. Little early in the day to hit it that hard?’

“Caspién smiled wider, a child’s mischief in his eyes. ‘Always midnight somewhere.’

“I reached out slow, took the wine from his hand. ‘Wise words.’

“‘Fools often speak the wisest.’

“My eyes were locked on Caspién as I cracked the seal. The crimson wax was frail with age, crumbling in my hand—long years had passed since these bottles were laid down, it seemed. Drinking deep, savoring that taste near-forgot, I dragged my knuckles over my lips.

"'It's good that men like you exist,' I told him. 'Highborn folk can take themselves too serious. There should always be one in court free to speak truth to the powerful.'

"'You speak wisdom, Chev—'

"'*Despoiler of nuns*. That's what you called me. As if I *ruined* her when we touched.' I leaned closer, fangs sharp against my tongue. 'Say what you will about me, Caspién. But speak ill of my wife again, I'll tear your teeth out through your arsehole, understood?'

"His smile died entirely, jaw clenched. And though I stood taller, broader, paleblood son and Sword of the Realm, that Fool met my eyes, his own glittering with malice.

"'Understood. Chevalier.'

"I could feel the dagger of Caspién's gaze between my shoulder blades as I climbed the stair, bottle in hand. But taking another mouthful, I heard ruckus outside; clashing blades and faint cries that drove all thought of that feckless idiot from my mind. Fearing for Aaron again, I marched for the bailey to see what lay behind the fuss. The strangled sun was high, but gloom still hung inside the courtyard. A barracks stood across the yard from the stables, and a training ground had been set up to drill the gens d'armes—wooden dummies and straw targets. Among them, two figures danced back and forth, dueling in the dim light.

"Charlotte and Lachlan.

"My cousin's form was fierce, longblade hissing as she advanced, fringe plastered to a sweat-stung brow. She and Lachie dueled with wooden swords, but I saw Charlotte played no games; striking with deadly speed at Lachie's chest, throat, nethers. Feinting swift, she landed a solid blow, Lachlan grunting as her blade met his gut. And backing away, for the first time since I'd met her, I saw my cousin's lips twist in a smile.

"'Enough schooling, Frère á Craeg?'

"Lachie straightened with a wince. 'We've nae begun the lesson, Mlle de León.'

"She smiled, twirling her sword. 'You cannot learn a thing you think you know.'

"He grinned in return, green eyes flashing. 'I know a thing or three.'

"My old 'prentice lunged, lashing out at Charlotte's chest. His strength was Dyvok born, and he wielded wooden greatswords, one in each hand. But I could tell he held himself back—enough to give his foe a fighting chance. Fight she did, their blades crashing so hard that tiny thunderbolts rang on the walls. Yet in the end, Charlotte was mortal, and Lachlan paleblooded; one of the finest blades San Michon ever produced. He locked up her guard, bearing down with his strength. Charlotte's face twisted as she tried to stand her ground, and though she trembled with strain, still I fancied her smile widened as Lachlan *pressed.* Yet as she buckled, she lashed out, sweeping his leg and sending the pair tumbling to the cobbles. Lachlan landed atop her, but Charlotte had drawn a dagger from her belt, steel glinting in the grim dawn light as she pressed it up against Lachie's throat. The pair were breathless, searching each other's eyes a long moment before Lachlan chuckled.

"'I didn't think this a fight to the death, mademoiselle.'

"'Then you know me not at all, monsieur.'

"'I know a little, I think. Perhaps not so much as I'd—'

"Somber applause rang across the bailey, cutting Lachie's words off at the knees. And sat atop the stable in a smear of dull sunlight, I saw Aaron now, clapping slowly. His eyes were fixed on Lachlan's, lips twisted as my old 'prentice rolled upright.

"'Well played, á Craeg. You timed that fall *exceptionally.*' Blue eyes flickered to Charlotte, roaming my cousin up and down. 'Pleasant dreams tonight, I'll wager.'

"'Shut yer mouth, de Coste,' Lachie snarled.

"Charlotte rose slowly, dragging damp hair off her sweat-stung skin. 'No one gave you permission to leave your cell, leech.'

"Aaron winced, glancing to the guards at the doors. 'Technically, I'm still in it. Or at least *on* it. And it's a stable, M_{lle} de León, not a cell. Hardly the most daunting of dungeons.'

"'Perhaps I should find a more suitable hole to put you in,' Charlotte hissed.

"Aaron glanced to Lachlan. 'Are you quite certain you want *me* in it?'

"'That's fuckin' *it.*' Lachie hurled aside his wooden blades, stalking across the bailey. 'Get yer arse down here, or I'm comin' up there to get it.'

"'But,' Aaron glanced to Charlotte, 'I'm not allowed to leave my *cell.*'

"'I'll nae tell ye again, I—'

"'Aright, that's enough.' I stepped from the shadows, bottle in hand. 'Put it back in your pants, Lachie. And *you,*' I growled, glaring at Aaron. 'Show some fucking manners.'

"Aaron arched one brow, affecting a lilting Ossian brogue. 'Ah, the brave chevalier rides to his wee squire's defense. Warms the cockles o' the heart it does, me boyo, me lad. To be sure, to be sure.'

"'Mock all ye like, wanker,' Lachie spat.

"'Merci, I believe I shall.'

"'And it'll do *naught* to fill the hole inside ye. Nor set the scales of yer sins even. But one day ye'll pay fer the blood ye've spilled, de Coste. I vow it.'

"'*One* day? I pay *every* day, wee squire.'

"'That's enough, Aaron,' I growled. 'Being a cunt doesn't make you clever. And cruelty's a coin that's only repaid in kind. I'd have thought you'd been served enough of it by now to know that.'

"I glowered at my old battlebrother, but Aaron refused to meet my eyes, the anger of last night still thick between us. Grunting, I turned at last to Lachlan.

"'You busy?'

"My old 'prentice glanced to my cousin, smoothing back his hair. 'I mean, nae r—'

"'Good. Let's be off.'

"Without waiting for objection, I spun on silvered heels, stalking back across the bailey. Finishing off my bottle, I marched through the bustling château without pause, out into the rear courtyard, and through the clifftop gates to the road beyond.

"Afternoon was deepening now, dim daysdeath light falling over the scarred city below, the oceans gleaming black. The docks were thronged with people, gulls swarming overhead, the fisher fleet that kept the city fed unloading their catch. I was halfway down the cliffroad before I heard silver heels striking the cobbles behind, my old 'prentice slowing as he finally reached my side, wreathed in the scent of fresh sweat.

"'Took your time,' I muttered.

"Lachie grinned, green eyes shining. 'Ye walk quick fer an old man.'

"'Damn right I do. We've places to be. If you and Aaron weren't so busy spitting shit at each other…'

"'He always takes the first bite, Gabe. But I'll take the last. If yer boy doesn't like the taste of shoe leather, ye should warn him to stop chewin' at my ankles.'

"'He's not my boy, he's my brother. Same as you. I wish you'd remember that.'

"I turned with a scowl, drawing my pipe from my greatcoat as I marched on down the cliffroad. After a breath, Lachie fell into step beside me.

"'Where we headed?'

"'Checking in with M. Cortez. Sooner we're gone from this fucking city, the better.'

"'Aye. Warm baths. Hot food. Soft beds. It's a shitehole to be sure.'

"'Every day we waste, Voss draws closer to Augustin.'

"'I know it.' Lachlan sucked his lip, speaking with hesitance. 'But … the capital isn't helpless, Gabe. There *are* the imperial legions for Voss to contend with. Alexandre's Golden Host, sixty thousand strong. Nae sure what four more of us will do in the grand scheme.'

"I stopped short, staring him down. 'The hell are you saying?'

"'Just … there's other things to fight for, mebbe. I'd nae thought to, but I'll admit … I'm startin' to like this place.'

"'I'll bet you are.'

"'Fuck does *that* mean?'

"'It means a blind man could see the way you're looking at Charlotte. She's a fine woman, no matter the acid on her tongue or the poison folk spit at her back. But you've known her less than a *week*. You're a sworn brother of the Silver Order, for fuck's sake.'

"'Yer honestly lecturing *me* about sworn oaths?'

"'No.' I put my hand on his shoulder, searched his eyes. 'I know the wanting of another's arms when night grows dark. But I *also* know how much weight the vows you swore to the Order hold in your heart.'

"'What Order?' he scoffed. 'Our abbot is *slain*. Monastery gutted. Hell, after the slaughter yer brother and his fuckin' master waged in Maergenn, I'll wager there's nae more than a handful of 'saints left in the whole damned empire.'

"I gritted my teeth, knowing he was right. The holy brotherhood I'd been part of was no more than a memory now. Despite all they'd done to me, to my friends, I was saddened at the thought of their passing. Ashamed at the role I'd played in it.

"'*You* still live,' I told him. 'You embody all that was good in them, Lachlan.'

"Lachie shook his head, glancing up to the château. I could see Charlotte on the battlements now, ocean winds whipping through long dark hair.

"'Just … I keep thinking on the service last night, like. What that bishop said. *Love is the tie that binds us. The anchor that moors us. The wind that allows us to fly.*'

"My gaze sharpened, cold whispers echoing in my head.

"'I've never been in love,' he sighed. 'Never even *kissed* a girl, d'ye know that?'

"'… No. I didn't.'

"Lachlan pursed his lips, voice gone soft. 'I know what it is I fight fer, Gabe. What I'd *die* fer. I just wonder … what now I live fer.'

"'Only you can answer that question, Lachie. And you only need walk this road as long as you wish to. But *I* have a king to kill.'

"His gaze dropped, and he breathed deep. I could see the pain in him. The values that bound him: loyalty, faith, honor. But he was still a young man, my old 'prentice. A whole life ahead if he chose it. That was a great deal to give up for brotherhood.

"Lachlan looked to my cousin, stood upon the battlements. To my surprise, Charlotte slowly raised her hand to him in greeting. But Lachie nodded, squaring his jaw.

"Ever the man I'd raised him to be.

"'Let's be about yer blade.'

"He turned his back on the château, trudging down the cliffroad with tattooed hands clasped behind. I lingered a moment, staring up at my cousin. My thoughts were atumble, but I kept them well behind my teeth as I rejoined my brother, trekking side by side to the port town below. Through the bustling markets, past Le Dôme and the beautiful Angel Way. Commonfolk bowed, messieurs wishing me fairdawning, mesdames asking for my blessing. Again, my grandfather's offer swum to my mind, and unbidden, I found myself wondering what it might be like to stake claim here. To tend the fire ma famille had lit, burning in the sea of darkness this empire had become.

"*Love is forgiveness. Love is acceptance.*

"*I have a king to kill.*

"La Forge de San Javon was busy as we arrived, 'prentices stoking flames, journeymen working with hammer and tong, the hymn of iron in the air. I'd not taken time to appreciate the genius of this place when I visited yesterday, and studying it now, I found it the marvel Baptiste had declared. Its design was altogether arcane; a great series of burning maws and hissing bellows and a vast snaking nest of pipes. Breastplates and blades hung on the walls, etched with filigree and roaring lions. Great racks of those wondrous mechwork crossbows lined the walls, scripture etched around their iron sights. There's little uglier in this world than war, coldblood, but there can still be beauty in its instruments. Yet looking about at the marvel that was La Forge de San Javon, I couldn't see its master.

"'A moment, garçon?'

"The 'prentice's eyes went wide as I spoke, and he wiped a grimy hand on his apron before offering it. 'The Black Lion … An honor, Chevalier.'

"'Merci. But pray, where is your Master Cortez?'

"'I…' The lad frowned, looking around the hammering din. 'He and M. Baptiste were here a moment ago. You might try the storeroom out back?'

"Lachie nodded thanks, and we made our way through the foundry, dodging scurrying 'prentices, breathing in the boiling scent of coal and coke. Double doors parted before us, and I led Lachlan through to a large stone building at the foundry's rear, blessedly cool after that stifling heat. We heard murmuring ahead, making our way past sacks of ore, crates of gear, racks of tools. And far at the warehouse's rear, amid cool shadows and old cobwebs, we found Baptiste and Cortez.

"Wrapped in each other's arms.

"The sight was a punch to my chest, my stomach dropping into my boots. I was reminded of the night I'd discovered Aaron and Baptiste in the San Michon Armory, kissing in the light of the forge. Cortez and Baptiste were kissing too, bodies entwined, skin to burning skin. Baptiste's shirt was cast aside, britches unbound, the forgemaster's hands plunged within. Their mouths were one, their passions flame, Cortez gasping as Baptiste dragged him back by the scruff, forcing the smaller man to his knees. Cortez pressed his mouth to Baptiste's leathers now, kisses rising up, up toward—

"'We interrupting?'

"The pair startled as Lachlan spoke, Cortez rising to his feet and staggering back. Baptiste was aghast, eyes wide, face bloodless, lips parted in shock.

"'Lachlan,' he whispered. 'Gabriel…'

"Cortez looked chagrined, casting about for some escape as I hissed.

"'Hard at work on Ashdrinker, Forgemaster? All your skill brought to bear?'

"'I … I beg pardon, Chevalier.' His dark eyes met mine, knuckles dragged across stubble-burned lips. 'Forgive me, I … I should return to my forge.'

"'What for?' Lachlan scoffed. 'Heat enough in here aready by the look.'

"'Get out of here, Lachlan,' I growled, eyes on Baptiste. 'I'll meet you up at the château later. We need to talk.'

"Lachlan smirked, looking Baptiste up and down. 'We're not the only ones.'

"I grabbed his arm as he turned to leave. 'Keep this to yourself, you hear? Not a fucking word to anyone. *Especially* Aaron.'

"Lachie raised a hand, half solemn, half delighted. 'Saint's honor, like.'

"I scowled as my old 'prentice spun on his heel, winking farewell to Baptiste. Cortez took his leave, hurrying past my glower with tail tucked firmly between his legs. With a mouthful of mumbled nonsense, Baptiste made to follow, held up short by my hand on his arm. I waited until we were alone, rebuke seething behind my teeth all the while.

"'Baptiste, what *the fuck* are you doing?'

"'I…' He clenched his jaw, not meeting my eyes. 'It's not how it looks, Gabe…'

"'Then how *is* it? You're supposed to be down here mending Ashdrinker and instead…' I gritted my teeth, searching for the words. 'Fucks*sakes*, Baptiste, Aaron is up there sleeping in horseshit, and you're down here saddling up another man!'

"'Mind your own affairs, Gabriel.'

"'This *is* my affair! You're my friends! I watched you and Aaron give up everything! Defying the Church, the Order, all you had just to be together! And in a world rotted halfway to hell, your love was the one thing I knew would endure through it all!'

"'You still believe that?' he scoffed. 'What do you think will happen to our *love* when I'm fifty, Gabriel? When I'm seventy? You think he'll love me then?'

"I clenched my jaw, my voice softening as his shot hit home. 'No man knows what comes amorrow, brother. All I know for certain is Aaron loves you now.'

"'And this is how he shows it?'

"Baptiste broke free of my grip, turning with a snarl and punching the wall so hard his knuckles split. The blade-bright scent of blood stabbed the air, the beast suddenly snaking up from my dark, poised but one shivering breath behind its bars.

"'He'll not *touch me,* Gabriel! Do you understand what that's like?'

"I took one step back, belly rolling as that red scent kissed the air, tongue sticking to my teeth. 'I understand any refusal Aaron makes of you comes not from a dearth of love, but abundance of it. Fuckssakes, don't you see? He doesn't want to hurt you!'

"'I see my own husband looks at me like I am poison, and he but one sip from hell!'

"'Aaron *is* in hell! I know the heat of those flames all too well!'

"Baptiste breathed deep, goosebumps prickling over his skin now. And fixing me with eyes gone dark as sin, he whispered into the blood-stung air.

"'I know you do.'

"He stepped forward, pupils so swollen they near swallowed his eyes. And licking at dry lips, he lifted his hand, bright crimson across his knuckles, dripping from his fingertips.

"'You need not burn alone, Gabriel.'

"I recoiled, knives of cold dread sinking into my belly.

"'… What the fuck are you saying?'

"'Just a little, Gabe,' Baptiste pleaded, trembling. 'Just one bite.'

"'This isn't you, Baptiste.' I looked at him aghast, heart thundering. 'Seven fucking Martyrs, *this isn't you.* I know you and Aaron are having troubles, but *this* isn't the answer. He needs your strength, now more than ever!'

"'God help me, I've *tried*! I've prayed God to take this cup from me, but I can't forget the bliss of that Kiss! Aaron claims it a sin, just as the silver brothers once did! But I say no sin is love! No sin can come of it, for no evil can be born of that which is divine!'

"Those words struck me, in truth and familiarity—the homily Santiago had spoken just last night, echoing again in my skull. I could recall drinking from my Astrid; endless nights of blood and fire in our bed, the love between us writ deepest red. But I shook my head to clear it, teeth sharp against my tongue as I tore my eyes from his bloody hand.

"'Get back to work, Baptiste. *Never* speak to me of this again. I want Ashdrinker whole and us gone from this cursed place by weeksend, you fucking hear me?'

"He stared a moment longer, that awful, hellborn desire burning in his eyes.

"'… I hear you.'

"I near fled the warehouse, dragging out my pipe as I burst back into the foundry. I spared a glower for M. Cortez as I passed, but he refused to meet my eyes. I saw Ash laid on his workbench, starsteel gleaming red in the forgelight. But the sweat, the heat, the *scent* of all those bodies filled my lungs, and I staggered into the street, striking my flintbox and dragging a bowlful into my burning lungs.

“The sacrament washed over me, water-thin and weak, the smoke I breathed near emerging as a sob. A mother brushed past me, her scent like a gaff hook in my belly, the boy who walked at her side looking up into my eyes and *quavering* at the thing he saw there. I’d never felt so close to the precipice, screwing my eyes shut against the sight of the folk around me, the tempest of their heartbeats, the images flooding my mindseye; heads torn from necks, throats ripped wide, bathing myself in that blessed red flood.

“And then the bells began to sing.

“I opened my eyes, found myself on my knees, looking across the thoroughfare toward the song. I saw graceful spires rising above tumbled rooftops, ringing in the hour before duskmass. The sky was daysdeath dark; a great pall flung across the heavens and smothering the light. But the sinking sun was eclipsed behind Le Dôme now, and it seemed the cathedral was wreathed in a halo of flame as those bells tolled across the city. Amid their song, I fancied I heard that voice again, not one but a multitude, ringing in the thirst-scorched halls of my heart.

“*Love is the cure for all suffering.*

“*The balm for all pain.*

“*The answer to every question worth asking.*

“And I knew then, where all of this led. Dragging myself to my feet and one shaking hand across my cracking lips, eyes on those spires that stabbed at heaven.

“‘Time for church.’”

XI

MYSTERIOUS WAYS

“MY HEART WAS slamming upon my ribs as I stepped into the grand cathedral. The choir was practicing in the loft, gables echoing with beautiful song. Pale candles burned upon the altar, the stones beneath my feet laid out in great slabs, marked with the wheel and carved with names—*Pascal de León, Tirso de León, Alfonse de León*. I realized my ancestors were all buried beneath this church. That if I took up my grandfather’s offer, I might one night join them. Despite the morbid notion, for a moment I was overcome with a sense of belonging, the hunger inside me blessedly abating.

“The sight of two familiar figures down the nave soon swallowed my tranquility—Charlotte and my grandfather’s Fool. They knelt afore the altar, bathed in candlelight, shadows dancing on the walls. Standing in the stained glass glow amid that choirsong, again I fancied I heard a whisper, echoing in the bloodwarm dark behind my eyes.

“*The highest goal to which we can aspire. The truth beyond truth. The greatest gift our heavenly Father* ever *gave us was the capacity to—*

“‘Chevalier?’

“I turned at the voice, found old Bishop Santiago approaching up the aisle, leaning upon an ornate shepherd’s crook. He wore red velvet robes, fingers adorned by jeweled rings, the wheel about his neck agleam. I looked again to those candles on the altar, the sconces they rested inside. The trim on the Testaments. The chalice in the sanctum.

“Everywhere I looked, it glittered.

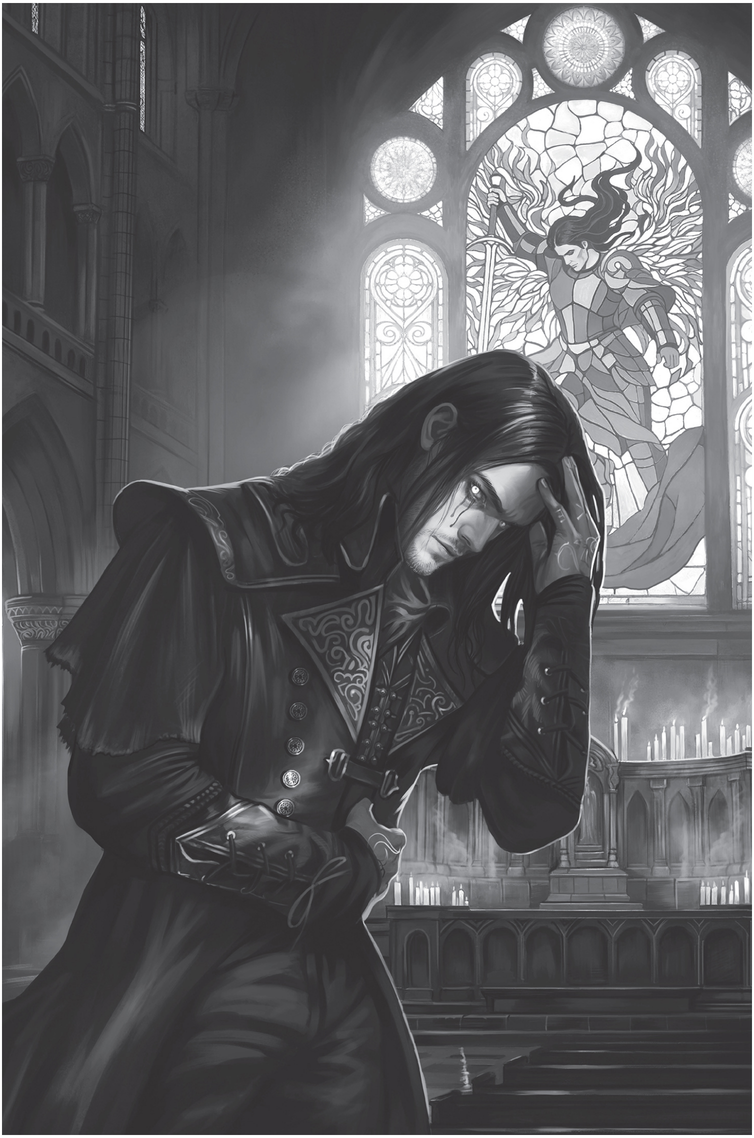
"*Gold*.

"'May I help you, my son?' Santiago asked. 'Mass does not begin for another hour.'

"'I'm not here for mass, old man.'

"'Contrition, then? You look troubled, child.'

"'These are troubled times.'



"'I know it well,' he nodded, solemn. 'Yet still, the love of God endures.

Like Gabriel's flame given unto the Almighty's own son, it burns with a light unquenchable, and those who accept his love shall be accorded a place in the kingdom of heaven.'

"I scoffed, looking at my namesake, ablaze upon that great window behind the altar.

"'You truly believe that?'

"'You do not, I take it?'

"I gazed at the Redeemer's statue now, bathed in stained-glass light. Remembering that tomb beneath Maergenn, that prophecy revealed, that awful truth unveiled.

"'Sometimes I honestly wish I did. In night's deeping, alone in my bed, I wonder what it would be like to be able to ignore the hypocrisy. The cruelty. To content myself with the thought that no matter how dark it gets, how senseless it seems, the Almighty has some kind of plan.' I shook my head and sighed. 'I envy you, old man. I truly do. To be able to look at the living corpses of slaughtered children and declare *It's his will.* To roam endless fields of shallow graves and say *He loves us still.* To stare into the face of brutality, unchecked, unavenged, and to excuse it all with a wave of my hand and the answer for every hard question I *ever* asked a holy man: *The Lord moves in mysterious ways.*'

"I looked the bishop over, fangs stirring my gums.

"'But then I remember I'm not an infant. Hiding under a soft blanket for fear of the dark. Only a coward raises a fist to his child and calls it love. I name no one my Father who never loved me as a son. And I would scorn to lie meek upon the block and smile up at he who lifts the axe and tells me he has a fucking plan.'

"'Your rage is understandable, my son. We all of us have suffered through the death of days. But in darkest times, even the smallest flame can be a beacon. In a world filled with hatred, the tiniest act of love can be a redemption. Surrender not to the dark without, but the light *within.*' He gestured around us; the gables ringing with beautiful song, the fiery glow spilling through the wings of that angel behind the altar. 'You are bathed in it, even now. Life. Love. Take but one more step, trust in *him,* and he will show you the way.'

"Santiago touched my arm, gentle hand and gentle gaze.

"'Will you pray with me, my son?'

"'I'd rather shit in my hands and clap.'

"He blinked at that, blue eyes glinting. For a moment, the old man looked truly wounded, and more … *disappointed.* Those whispers rang again upon my skin, the plea for love, forgiveness, acceptance. I softened then, dragging one hand through my hair.

"'Désolé. That was cruel of me. You're just doing your job.'

"'Rather badly, it seems.' Santiago's lips curled in a kindly smile. 'But no offense is taken, Chevalier. It is not what we say, but what we *do* which matters in life. And you have done a very great deal for the folk of this empire. There *is* great goodness in you, Gabriel de León. The cloak of your despair cannot veil it completely.'

"'You remind me of a priest I used to know. A goodly brother of San Guillaume named Rafa, who offered me patient counsel despite my lack of manners.'

"Sighing, I offered my hand.

"'Forgive me. I beg you.'

"The bishop glanced at the roses and skulls on my skin, glinting metallic in the candlelight. Smiling, he took hold of just my fingertips, his grip weak and brief.

"But I closed my left hand around his right, squeezing with both now, my silver sevenstar pressed upon his skin. The old bishop smiled tighter, blue eyes glinting like cracking glass, finally snatching his fingers free.

"'A warrior's grip,' he chuckled, rubbing his skin. 'Most impressive.'

"I chuckled in kind. 'I forget my own strength sometimes. Merci for your wisdom. I'll not keep you from your preparations.'

"The old man nodded, and with a bow, made his way down the aisle toward Charlotte, leaning upon his staff. I watched my cousin, the Fool looking in my direction now. And with one last glance at my namesake ablaze, I strode from the cathedral.

"My thoughts were a storm, those whispers echoing at my back as I strode through Le Dôme's duskdoors. Yet almost as soon as I crossed the threshold, my thirst returned, slinking from the dark like a serpent and taking up its perch on my shoulder. It was with me as I roamed León's streets, her tavernes and boardwalks, haunted thoughts my only company, rising now like dusklight shadows as I climbed back up the cliffroad.

"It rode heavy upon my back through my grandfather's halls, but my heart was heavier still at all I'd seen that day. Baptiste's betrayal. Lachlan's fears. Cracks splitting the mountains against which I set my back. Out into the fore-courtyard and from there to the stable I walked, passing the men on guard with a grim nod and a glance to the steel in their hands. And stepping into darkness, I looked about for my friend.

"'Aaron?'

"I searched the gloom, the rafters above, heart thumping as I found no sign.

"'Aaron?' I called again.

"'I'm h-here, Gabriel.'

"I followed the voice, weak and soft, through the stink of horseshit and into the shadows at the stable's rump. And there I found him, crouching in his dark, a portrait of perfect misery. Aaron's arms were wrapped around his belly, lips peeled back from his fangs, fighting the same blaze blooming now in me. He met my eyes, shadows of hellish hunger etched in his own as he whispered.

“‘You l-look just like I f-feel.’

“I knelt in the mud beside him, meeting that haunted gaze. Terrified of what I’d say. Of what it would mean. But knowing I must speak all the same.

“‘Brother … I must tell you something.’”

XII

FALLEN ANGELS

“NIGHT HAD FALLEN on the City of Lions by the time I’d told my tale.

“The sun had sunk below the worldsedge, the bells had called the faithful to Le Dôme, but I’d sat in the reek of dung and horse, explaining all I’d seen that day. Aaron’s fury was *terrible,* dawning slow in ice-blue eyes as I spoke of Baptiste and Cortez in each other’s arms, the offer he’d made me afterward. And when I was done with my tale, Aaron rose to his feet and spat three words, dripping with murderous rage.

“‘This ends *now*.’

“My cry of warning was swallowed by the crack of splintering timbers as Aaron threw himself into the air, flying like a cannon shot through the stable roof. I roared again in the hail of rooftiles and splinters, dashing out into the evening breeze and the shouts of panicked gens d’armes, pointing at the shadow now flying over the château roof.

“*‘Sound the alarm! ’* came the cry.

“*‘The coldblood is loose! ’*

“‘Aaron!’ I roared, dashing after him. ‘Aaron, Godssakes, *STOP*!’

“Lieutenant Mathieu emerged from the guardhouse, shouting my name, but I was already off, flinging myself up the château wall and scrambling after my friend. Aaron had hurled himself onto the rear battlements, guards flung aside and ramparts cracking as he landed like thunder. He gazed over the metropolis below, her stones stained blood-red in the failing dusk. He’d not walked her streets; he’d no knowing where his mark might be found. But duskmass in the City of Lions was mandatory for her citizens, and toward that great cathedral Aaron turned his gaze, flinging himself out into the night.

“The streets were silent, the homes and halls and stores and stockyards all emptied. Le Dôme’s windows were ablaze with candlelight, hymns echoing within. Outside, that legion of stone angels stood vigil about its walls, set to guard it from all evil. But from the sky, a black shadow fell among them, landing with an impact so thunderous the flagstones of Le Chemin des Anges shattered like glass. A figure rose from the rubble, greatcoat billowing in salt-stung winds as it roared with the all the rage of a husband betrayed.

“‘FERNANDO CORTEZ!’

“The hymn inside the cathedral faltered. Aaron lashed out with one fist, smashing the statue of the nearest angel—grim Mahné with his grinning skull and wicked scythes. The impact was terrifying, and with the groan of splitting stone, the Angel of Death tottered like a drunkard at last call, crashing to the flagstones with a *BOOM*.

“*‘WHERE IS CORTEZ? ’*

“Silence rang inside the cathedral now, a member of the gens d’armes emerging from the dawndoors—a youngblood with long dark hair and fuzz on his chin. He cried out as Aaron struck another statue; sweet Chiara, the blind Angel of Mercy, falling like an elm beneath the woodsman’s axe and shattering on the flagstones.

“The youngblood’s roar of alarm echoed in the night, more folk emerging from the cathedral now, cries of ‘*Coldblood! ’* echoing across the Angel Way. A tall figure forced his way through the panic-struck crowd at the dawndoors, dark eyes wide.

“‘Aaron?’ Baptiste cried. ‘Godssakes, what are you *doing*?’

“‘Where is he?’ Aaron demanded. ‘Where is your *fucking whore,* husband mine?’

“‘Aaron, please—’

“The song of heavy boots rang on broken cobbles as the first of the soldiery arrived, burning torches and naked blades in their hands. They encircled my brother, brows smeared with ash, snatches of scripture on their lips. But Aaron moved like a midnight wind, terrible strength and rage unleashed, knocking them aside like strawmen. He disarmed the first fool to charge him—that brave dark-haired youngblood who’d sounded the alarm, snatched up like rags and chaff. Smashing more soldiers aside with his fist, Aaron bellowed his fury and heartbreak into the night. And as the faithful looked on in horror and his beloved in agony, Aaron finally succumbed to the monster within—opening his mouth wide and sinking his fangs deep into the youngblood’s throat.

“The lad screamed in pain, the townsfolk in terror, Aaron growling as he swallowed the first human blood he’d drunk in *months*. The youngblood was tense as three bowstrings, lashes fluttering on his cheeks as the ecstasy of the Kiss took hold, but Aaron had no time to drink his fill. One mouthful taken, two, then three, and the lad was hurled back into his fellows with a *crunch*. Bows were smashed aside, blades shattered, my brother's voice ringing with monstrous fury and the gifts of his deathless father both.

"'You think to slay a lord of night with butter knives and burning twigs?' he bellowed. 'Run back to your hovels, sons of León, and pray *God* I do not find you! I am hell ascendant! I am death triumphant! Look upon me and—'

"'DE COSTE!'

"Lachlan's roar rang over the tumult; the screaming women, the running feet. Aaron turned to find my old 'prentice emerging from Le Dôme, face twisted in fury. Charlotte stood at Lachie's side, gaze boiling with hatred. The gens d'armes were backing away from Aaron now, terrified by the gifts of his blood. But Lachlan stood like a mountain. He carried no blade nor wheellock—we'd not been given back our weapons, after all. But his hands were balled into stone-hard fists as he faced my old friend down. His eyes drifted from the fallen youngblood to the bloody drool hanging from Aaron's chin.

"'True colors shown at last,' he spat.

"'This is *not* your concern, wee squire,' Aaron hissed.

"Lachlan stalked down the cathedral steps, chin low as he growled.

"'It's *always* been my concern. I warned Gabe it would come to this. *The Dead feel as beasts, look as men, die as devils*.'

"And fingers curled into claws, he tore off his greatcoat and shirt, unveiling the ink beneath.

"His aegis was silver fire, piercing the night like a hundred spears. His arms were ablaze with angels—Raphael, Eirene, Mahné, Evangeline. Swords and roses graced his ribs, a portrait of the Mothermaid and the infant Redeemer upon the rippling iron of his belly. But the sigil of his bloodline blazed brightest; that bear and broken shield of the Untamed, burning now in Aaron's eyes as the vampire took one trembling step back.

"'Xavier Pérez,' Lachlan spat.

"Aaron hissed, lips dripping red. '*What?* '

"Lachlan stalked toward Aaron now, silver heels crunching on cracked flagstones and snarling another name with every step.

"'Arash Sa-Pashin. Philippe the Wolf. Maxim Sa-Shaipr. Tomas Tailleur. Kurtis the Tower. Antony and Duggan á Sadhbh.'

"'I've no idea wh—'

"'Soldiers of the light, all,' Lachlan growled, fangs now unveiled in his gums. 'Sons and brothers of San Michon who answered my call, riding to Gabe's aid in Maergenn.' Green eyes narrowed to knifecuts. 'Slain by the Blackheart and his *dog*.'

"'Aaron!'

“Baptiste cried out from behind the wall of soldiers, eyes brimming with tears.

“‘My love, please *stop* this!’

“Aaron looked around him, golden hair whipping in the chill sea breeze. He was fully encircled now, soldiers forming a wall of flame and steel. They pressed not forward—held at bay by the immortal terror he’d stirred in their hearts. But nor did they flee, buoyed up now by the fire of Lachie’s faith, the stone gaze of that mighty ring of angels, Gabriel tallest among them; the patron of their city, guarding León from all harm.

“And looking to Lachlan, Aaron whispered with dripping chin.

“*‘Woof.’*

“A blur of black and silver, a crunch of meat on bone, Baptiste’s heartsick cry lost as Lachlan crashed into Aaron’s chest. The impact was thunderous, gens d’armes shouting as the pair crashed through the circle of soldiers, scattering all like toys. Charlotte rushed forward, roaring warning, my brothers falling on each other like starving wolves.

“Lachlan was filled with holy fury, aegis burning like long-lost stars. His fist met Aaron’s jaw, broken teeth glittering as they sprayed through the air. Another punch followed, another, rocking Aaron’s head back on his neck, golden locks spattered with blood. But eyes flooded red with the life he’d stolen, Aaron struck back, landing a punch to Lachie’s chest so vicious that the song of breaking ribs rang in the night.

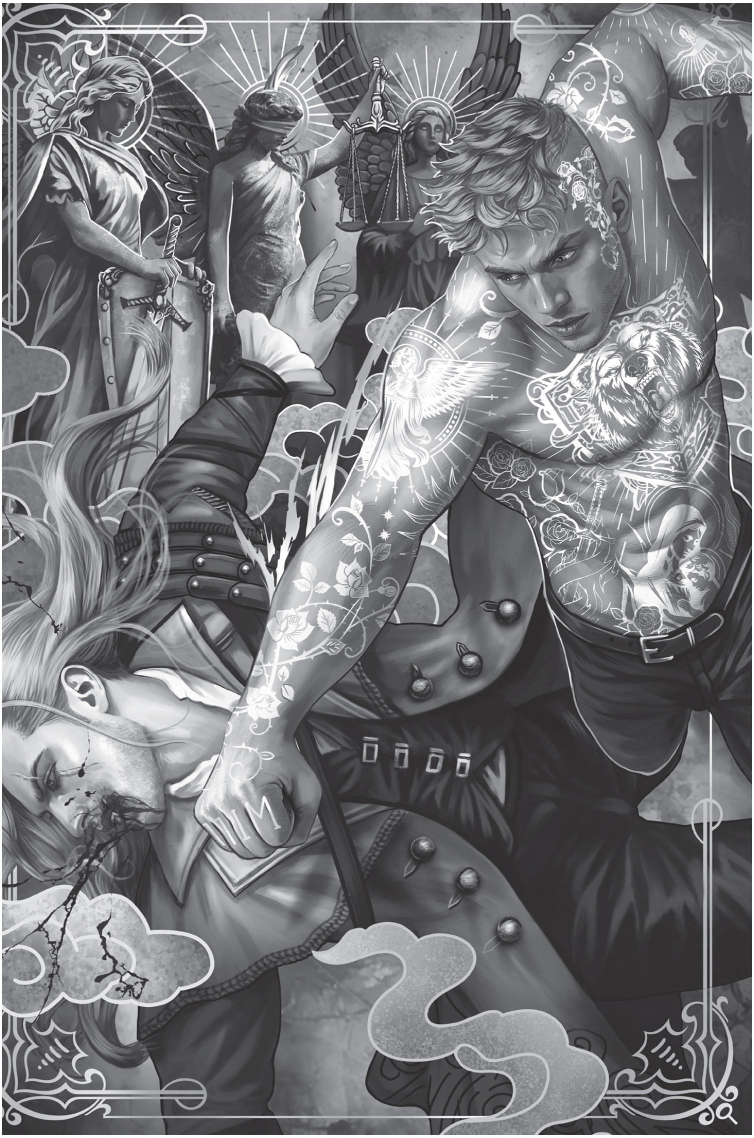
“I was still following in my brothers’ wake, desperate, scrambling rooftop to rooftop, flinging myself down onto the cobbles of Le Chemin des Anges at last. Smashing my way through the ring of soldiers, I roared at the top of my lungs, running forward to break up the deadly brawl. But seizing Lachlan’s throat, Aaron slammed his fist into his face. Silver sizzled, Aaron’s flesh scorched black upon Lachie’s ink, but the blow was a terrible one, sending my old ’prentice crashing right into the statue of Raphael, Angel of Wisdom. Limestone shattered like timeworn clay, and with the awful sound of splintering rock and the screams of terrified townsfolk, the whole statue came crashing to the ground.

“I flew through the stone dust and thunder, knocking bewildered guards aside and roaring Aaron’s name. He stood over Lachlan now, hands charred to the bone and chin glazed with blood. But despite the burning silver on Lachlan’s skin, Aaron leaned down and seized my old ’prentice’s throat, dead flesh sizzling, black smoke rising.

“‘Wake up, wee squire.’

“Aaron hauled Lachlan from the rubble, backhanded him across the face.

“‘Time to d—’



“The longblade pierced his back, erupting from his chest in a spray of red. Aaron’s gasp died with the crackle of splintering ribs, Lachlan tumbling from his grip as he turned to face the fool who’d stabbed him. And there I stood, hands wrapped around the longblade I’d snatched from some soldier’s hands, drenched with Aaron’s blood.

“‘B-brother?’

“My eyes roamed his blackened claws, dripping mouth, and for a moment I could see nothing in my old friend but a mirror to my own wretched soul.

And as I breathed the scent of blood on his breath, I near *wept* as I felt my belly growl.

"'You're not my brother. You're a *fucking monster*.'

"Aaron staggered as if I'd struck him. 'You don't mean that…'

"'Look at yourself!' I bellowed, voice cracking at its edges. 'Look at what you've become! Godssakes, Aaron, what the hell are you *doing*?'

"I gestured to Lachlan, beaten bloody, and then to the bleeding youngblood, sprawled among his fellows. Baptiste was knelt beside the lad, hands pressed to his torn throat, staring at his beloved with tears in his eyes. A shadow of horror crossed Aaron's face, and he glanced at his hands, stepping forward and whispering, 'I'm sorry, I—'

"But I stepped between them, barring his way. The gens d'armes were closing in now, their courage buoyed up in my presence, and turning, I snatched a burning brand from one fellow's hand. Aaron flinched back, hissing, flames reflected in fear-struck eyes.

"'Get the fuck out of here, Aaron. And don't come back.'

"'Gabriel … It's not my fault. You of all people…'

"Shouts rang across the bailey—Lieutenant Mathieu, charging through the crush with a cadre of archers at his back. They carried mechwork bows, fully loaded, iron sights already ablaze. I looked back to Aaron, tears in my eyes.

"'GET *OUT* OF HERE!'

"The arrows flew, and Aaron rolled aside, Baptiste crying his name. As another burning volley cut the night, with one despairing glance at his beloved, Aaron threw himself up onto the statue of Evangeline. Limestone wings cracked as he kicked off again, sailing across Le Chemin des Anges and landing atop a nearby roof. Charlotte cried '*Bring him down!* ' and more arrows flew, flame lancing the night. But Aaron was gone, roof to roof, just a shadow now, flung over the clifftop homes and château beyond.

"And into the cold night air, I whispered.

"'Au revoir, mon ami.'

"I heard a groan in the rubble, reaching down to the brother beside me. Lachlan took hold of my hand, coughing red as I dragged him upright. I tried to ignore the scent of it, slicked across my knuckles and dripping from his skin as I held him steady.

"'Aright, brother?'

"'I-I'll be aright. In a b-breath or two.' He winced, reaching for the pipe I offered, drooling blood through split lips. 'I warned ye that b-bastard wasn't to be trusted, Gabe.'

"'And yet you swore to *me* you would vouch for his conduct,' came a voice.

"I looked up to find my grandfather upon the cathedral steps, surrounded by his court. The citizens looked terrified, but the Baron's eyes were alight with rage as he drank in the destruction: shattered flagstones, toppled statues, bloodied soldiers, all but a few steps from sacred ground. Charlotte stood beside him, sword naked in her hand.

"'My apologies, Baron,' I said, bowing low. 'It seems my brethren and I have outstayed our welcome in the City of Lions. I think we'd best take our leave.'

"Dark eyes glinted, the sea breeze whispering among the rubble. Despite the Baron's fury, his voice softened. 'I am truly sorry to hear that. I had hoped my offer—'

"'I thank you kindly for it, Grandfather. But God knows I'm undeserving of it. If you seek one who is, look to your own right hand.'

"My grandfather scowled, glancing to Charlotte, but my cousin's eye was fixed on me. Lachlan spoke then, hissing red smoke through split lips. 'Ye want to leave *now*?'

"'Damn right I do, go pack your shit. We're leaving this city *tonight.*'

"'But Gabe…' Baptiste stepped from among the terrified faithful, eyes bruised with sorrow. 'We've not finished our work on Ashdrinker.'

"'I'd have thought you more concerned about mending your marriage, brother.'

"He hung his head then, eyes downturned. 'I swore to help you. She's not finished.'

"I cursed beneath my breath, searching the bloodless folk gathered upon the steps, the scowling Fool and the gobsmacked bishop, the horrified nobility and grim gens d'armes, finally spotting a familiar face among the throng.

"'How long until your work is done, M. Cortez? Presuming no more *distractions*?'

"The blackthumb glanced to Baptiste, lowering his eyes. 'A day. Perhaps two.'

"'You've got 'til dawn.' I turned on the big blackthumb, watching the cobbles with hangdog expression. 'Go with him, Baptiste. Work fast enough, we might be able to catch up to your husband. Lachie,' I said, turning on my old 'prentice, 'fetch our gear from the armory. I'll get us provisioned. We're gone with the sun. And clean the fucking blood off your face, eh?'

"I looked up to my grandfather, stomach ablaze.

"'With your leave, of course, good Baron?'

"My grandfather stroked his chin, fingertips brushing the golden pin at his lapel—the same burning blade my cousin wore. Those whispers on the sea wind seemed to thicken, shadows running deep, flickering torchlight underscoring the stares of the gens d'armes, the nobility, the old man gazing down at me with my mama's eyes.

"But finally, he nodded.

"'You have a king to kill.'

"'Merci.'

“One hand pressed to my aching belly, I glanced to my brethren.

“‘Let’s get the *hell* out of here.’”

XIII

DEEP ENOUGH TO DROWN IN

“ARGENT SEEMED AS keen to be back on the road as I.

“My tarreun whinnied softly as I dumped an armful of gear on the stable floor, sparing a moment to stroke his neck and murmur all would be well. Provisions had been secured, and I’d even snatched a bottle or six from my grandfather’s cellar for the journey east. My heart was bruising itself on my ribs for its pounding, my throat drought-dry as I marched back across the bailey, climbing stairs toward my boudoir three at a time. Trying to ignore the scent of the servants and soldiers about me, the song of their pulses almost too much to bear. I pictured Aaron sinking his fangs into that poor boy’s throat, tumbling into the dark he’d long eluded. My hands were shaking as I reached my bedchamber, thinking only to grab my gear and get swiftly to the forge.

“‘Chevalier.’

“The whisper was warm as pipe smoke, my belly sinking as I found Odette waiting in my boudoir once more. The maidservant stood beside my bed, clad in a pale muslin blouse and ha-bodice of old sky blue, long black hair spilling over shoulders as pale and smooth as angels’ wings. The scent of her was madness; moonsblood and soft perfume, and though I tried to rein in my temper, I couldn’t quite hold on.

“‘I’ve no time for this, mademoiselle.’

“‘I heard you were leaving us?’

“‘You heard right.’ I stalked to the armoire, gathering gear and stuffing it into my saddlebags. ‘So if you don’t mind—’

“‘I brought you a farewell gift.’

“The maid’s lips twisted as she produced a bottle from behind her back, dark eyes smoldering as she cracked the pale wax seal. As Odette pressed the bottle to her lips, my eyes were fixed upon her throat, watching the poetry of motion as she swallowed, long and deep. Her scent filled my lungs, more perilous than any poison, and with eyes yet closed, she lifted the bottle from her lips and continued to pour; the wine spilling over her chin, down her neck, her blouse, the muslin soaked red, translucent now. Eyes fluttering open, fixed on mine, Odette ran one hand up her soaking breasts, over her wine-slick throat.

“‘Aren’t you thirsty?’

“The beast in me bellowed, crashing against the bars and roaring its desire. Every muscle was corded, every vein *screaming,* the memory of my last drink from Phoebe before the walls of Maergenn alight and livid in my mind. What harm would another do, I reasoned? One more mouthful? One more drop? To have it *offered freely* when it was all I could do these days to stop myself just fucking *taking* it …

“‘Get out,’ I hissed.

“‘Chevalier—’

“But her plea was cut short, dark eyes widening with fright as I flashed forward with all the terrible speed of the damned. Odette shrank back against the wall, my face but an inch from hers now, breath hissing up my strangled throat and over my swollen tongue.

“‘I know what you see when you look at me. Some sweet darkness not deep enough to drown in. A fire to be danced near, but not burned by. Some monster yet governed by the slender and trembling will of a man.’

“I leaned closer now, my breath tickling her throat.

“‘I am *nothing* like the songs they sing for me, mademoiselle. I am death to all who love me. Doom to all who touch me. And if you had but one *inkling* of the horrors swelling in my mind’s eye at the sight of you, you’d run as fast and far as your feet could carry you. I can’t stop the fall that’s coming. I know that now. But sweet Mothermaid, I’d not have *you* be the cliff I plunge over. Not here. Not yet. So run, Mlle Odette.’

“I drew back, serpentine, trembling head to toe.

“‘God help you, *run.*’

“Run she did, stumbling as she flung herself from the room, slamming the door behind. The scent of her blood still filled the boudoir, my bars buckling as the beast smashed against them, bellowing to follow, hunt, *feed.* I sank to my knees as it threatened to overthrow me, no heaven to hope for, no salvation awaiting, no God to pray to.

“I heard the clink of glass, then. Felt the weight in my sleeve. And with trembling hands, I tore it from my hem—one of the vials of Dior’s blood I’d secreted there, held now in my silvered palm. Its color was madness, its promise almost more than I could bear. But I clung on with what little will I had left, that vial pressed between my palms now, praying as if that girl might hear me from the boughs of the heaven I'd never see.

"'Help me, chérie. Give me strength to see this through, I beg you.'

"I heard the soft music of a child's laughter, smelled the scent of silverbell in the air. The sangirè rose up in red floods, delirium shredding the last of my will with crimson claws. Always I'd known the thirst would be my end. But I'd never known it would be like *this*.

"'*Help* m-me, Dior…'

"The vial shattered, blood splashed across my shirt, my silvered palms, and oui, upon my tearstained face. And though it shames me near to breaking, though I *knew* I'd never walked so close to hell as this, I found my hand rising to my mouth then, tongue slipping from cracked lips, and God and Martyrs help me, tasting of that holy blood.

"*POWER*.

"That was all I knew. All I felt. Not the death of the thirst within me, but something closer to an annihilation of my own self. Even now, I've scarce got words to speak of it. I've drowned in the blood of ancien, been consumed by the sanguine blight of duskdancers, but I tell you true, vampire, *never* have I known sensation such as then. A moment that felt a *life-age* of the earth, dragged across the crucible of creation, splayed naked upon the anvil of existence, and smashed into infinity by the simple touch of that blood to my tongue.

"I saw myself as if from without, sprawled senseless upon the floor of my chamber. I rose up, borne through the château's ceiling on wings of crimson, and for a moment, I thought myself struck dead; soul departed wretched flesh and spiraling up to heaven.

"The whole city lay below me, and all the realm beyond, my wondering eyes sweeping across the Elidaeni Empire beneath that midnight sky. Looking south to Sūdhaem, I saw crimson wolves slinking northward, fangs dripping red. Peering southeast, I witnessed a tiny star above the Bay of Antoine, burning with a frail but fierce light. Gazing east to Elidaen, I saw a storm of ravens, their wings ice and their eyes blood.

"And I knew there *he* awaited me.

"Gazing on the city below me, I saw her cradled in the arms of tall white cliffs. Dark scars from my cousin's fires marred her skin, yet still she endured; the last light in the west. But my belly rolled as I looked closer, seeing mighty red coils now winding beneath León's alleys and boulevards, like some great river of blood. They were vast, scaled and gleaming; a *serpent,* I realized, winding in and below and through the city of my forebears. It was surrounded by roses, thrumming with bitterest chill, and at the city's heart—that great domed cathedral—I saw the viper's head, tongue flickering across Le Chemin des Anges, gazing up at me with eyes black as all hell's hunger as it whispered.

"*'GABRIEL.'*

"I knew what I saw. What it meant.

"But swelling at my back, so cold it froze my blood, I felt *true* darkness then. Beyond and below *anything* I have known. I turned northward, across Kingsgrave Bay to the frozen lands of Talhost. To the grim Zamesk Mountains, rising above the ruins of Charbourg. And from among those impassible black peaks, I saw a great hand, clawing upward from the earth, closing about the dim sun above and tearing it *screaming* from the sky.

"I woke upon the floor. Scarred cheek pressed to the boards, heart athunder in my chest. I dragged myself upright, looking to my shaking hands, still smeared with the blood of the Holy Grail. And I said what anyone in my place would have at that moment."

"Fuck my face?" Jean-François asked.

The silversaint nodded.

"Fuck my *face*."

XIV

FATHER OF WHISPERS

“A QUIET DEEPER than any I’ve known gripped the city of my forebears as I stepped into the night. Beyond the lull of a tomb, the still of a statue, the hush of dark before dawn. No breath of breeze. No song of sea. The City of Lions was filled with silence that night.

“Silence absolute.

“And yet I felt a *Pull* in the hollow of my chest, a dark undertow, dragging me in like a drowner. The wrongness of it struck me, the dread and feyness of all this, and yet I followed that Pull through the night. I knew where it led. What I’d find there. Red coils seething still in the reflection of my mind’s eye.

“‘*GABRIEL.*’

“No guard stood upon the château ramparts as I passed out onto the cliffroad. The midnight city was laid out beneath me, but not a soul on her streets could be seen. Walking her boulevards and thoroughfares, the crunch of my heels upon the cobbles the only sound, it seemed as if León had been utterly emptied of life. But as I strode on, yet drawn by that Pull, I heard it. Soft at first, but rising ahead of me beneath the cold blanket of night.

“The beating of some colossal heart.

“Le Chemin des Anges lay ahead, those angels encircling Le Dôme silent and still. For centuries had they stood vigil about the cathedral, two now toppled by Aaron’s rage. Yet foremost among them, still he remained: my namesake, looming in the dark before me. Staring up at his face, I was again struck with certainty I'd seen it before, the scent of brine and blood rising in my nostrils, the sound of Dior weeping and the song of wild pipes—

"*'GABRIEL.'*

"I climbed the cathedral stairs, that great pulse rising in my ears. And stepping across the threshold of Le Dôme, at last I discovered the source of that dreadful drum.

"León's people. Every citizen—mother and maid, babe and baker, priest and pauper—were there gathered, on their knees about that altar. Their eyes were closed, faces serene, utterly motionless save for the rise and fall of their chests and the choir of their pulses, united as one. Somehow every heart in that cathedral was beating all in time, the rush and swell of their blood strung together in a terrible red hymn. The space was dark as tombs, lit only by the candelabrum on the altar, flame glittering on every ring and necklet and pin of gold—*gold, not silver*—but down in the front rows, I saw my grandfather and his court all assembled, my heart twisting as I found Lachlan and Baptiste among them.

"*'GABRIEL.'*

"That voice. The same I'd heard at duskmass, in my dreams, reverberating on the arched ceiling above, the curved walls around, layered upon itself as if not one but a *multitude* spoke, and seemingly everywhere at once. I searched the gloom with paleblood eyes, the grim silence of the *thousands* around me chilling my blood as I roared.

"*'Where are you? '*

"*'IN THE HEART OF EVERY FATHER,'* came my answer, spoken in unison by each man and woman and child in that cathedral. '*IN THE BREATH OF EVERY BABE. IN EVERY DREAM AND DROPLET OF MY DOMAIN DO I ABIDE. AS ALWAYS I HAVE. AS ALWAYS I WILL.*'

"And looking to the altar, as if into some haze from long-lost summers of my youth, I saw him. As if some veil had been torn from my awestruck eyes, and a truth I'd *always* known was at last remembered, flooding the dust-dry halls of my long-broken heart.

"Tall. Sinuous. Flawless. Alabaster skin, pale as the raiment he wore, like some priest of ritual lost and midnights forgot. His robes were parted at his throat, smooth chest unveiled, that V-shaped line of cloth cutting low and perilous. Long dark hair swept back from a kingly brow, spilling down his shoulders like rivers of shadow. Yet his *eyes* were the darkest part of him, windows that opened into an emptiness so profound the light seemed simply to *die* in his gaze. To name him handsome was to name the tempest a spring breeze. The firestorm a candleflame.

"He was bleakest beauty.

"He was death divine.

"'Who are you?' I demanded.

"*'KNOW THEE, WHO I AM.* WHAT *I AM.*'

“I shivered, his reply once more spoken by every mortal mouth in that church.

“‘*SAY IT NOW, BLACK LION OF LORSON. SWEET SON OF LEÓN.*’

“Eyes black as hell bored into mine.

“‘*SAY. MY. NAME.*’

“His face I recalled at last, memory rising in my addled mind—not just the face of that statue outside, but that same face I’d seen in Maryn’s tomb beneath Maergenn. Those five figures encircling the Redeemer on his wheel at the moment of his death. Their fanged mouths open in anguish as he cursed them to eternity. Their bodies clad in priests’ garb, a different sigil hung around each neck—wolves, bears, skulls, ravens.

“*Serpents.*

“The Five. The first vampires, damned by the Redeemer they’d murdered to walk this earth forever. And his name slipped my lips in a cold whisper.

“‘Ilon. First of the Whispers.’

“I looked about us; that cathedral of dreamers, near dumb with the awe and horror of it. I understood now why duskmass was mandatory in the City of Lions. What must have been hidden in the communal cup these folk supped from every eve, in the wine we’d been offered at my grandfather’s feast—masked from our senses by the scent of Odette’s moonsblood, the Fool’s sliced fingertip—the riddle unraveled. My mind boggled at the scale of it. The *terror* of it. The power it must have taken to hold a grip upon so many minds. No ambition so trifling as the Dyvok. No mere court of thralls.

“A *city* of them.

“‘How can this be?’ I demanded. ‘There’s holy water at every door in this barony. We stand on sacred ground even now.’

“‘*BY MY WORD DIDST THY FOREBEAR LAY THIS CITY’S FIRST STONE,*’ the people answered. ‘*BY MY PATRONAGE WAS THIS CHURCH BUILT FROM DUST. THE FIRST WORD OF WORSHIP SPAKE NEATH THESE GABLES WERE NOT UNTO* HIM. *THEY WERE TO* ME. *THIS HOUSE BE MINE.*’

“The vampire tilted his head, speaking with the mouths all about us.

“‘*NO POWER HATH THY REDEEMER HERE.*’

“‘I don’t believe it. All these years, all these people, my famille, my mama…’

“I shook my head, horrified.

“‘All yours?’

“He stared then, and it seemed a hundred seasons bloomed and withered before the congregation replied. ‘*NOT ALL. FOR LONGEST YEARS, I RULED FROM SHADOWS, CHILD. A PRIEST HERE. A BARON THERE. I AM ILON, FATHER OF WHISPERS. NO THRONE NEED I TO SADDLE A KINGDOM.*’

“‘But Charlotte…’ I looked to my cousin, knelt among the other thralls. ‘The broods she burned. How the hell did mediae of the other lines ever get a foothold here, if you’ve ruled this city since its first brick was dragged from the kiln?’

“‘*HEAVY WEIGHS ETERNITY’S CROWN, CHILD. EVERY NIGHT THE SAME SONG. EVERY SONG, THE SAME REFRAIN. SOLACE IN SLUMBER, SOUGHT I. A CENTURY SLEEPING ’NEATH THE STONES THY FOREBEARS LAID, TO ESCAPE IMMORTALITY’S WEIGHT. YET IN THAT TIME, OTHERS SLUNK INTO THE SHADOWS I ONCE RULED. I COULD* FEEL *THEM. SPAWN OF DYVOK. CHASTAIN. VOSS. STAKING CLAIM WHERE NONE WAS EARNED. YET ’TWAS NOT ’TIL* HE *SET BEGGAR’S TREAD UPON MY STONES I TRULY BEGAN STIRRING FROM EVENTIDE’S ARMS.*’

“‘… He?’

“‘*THY FATHER.*’ The monster smiled, bloodless and razored. ‘*LICKING HIS WELL-EARNED WOUNDS AND SEEKING SUCCOR AT THY DAM’S MILK-WHITE TEAT. KNOW THEE, THE TRUTH OF THY LINEAGE, CHILD? KNOW THEE, THE DOOM WULFRIC AND HIS ILK TRIED TO UNLEASH AT CHARBOURG?* ’

“I thought of my vision then; that great black hand rising from the mountains to the north, tearing the sun from the sky. But I gave no reply.

“‘*AND SO I ROSE AT LAST. SHAKING OFF SLUMBER’S DUST BUT SLOWLY, AND WEAK FROM A CENTURY IN LIGHTLESS BLACK. THY SWEET COUSIN I USED TO BURN THE CUCKOOS FROM MY NEST. AND IN YEARS SINCE, I HAVE MADE THIS CITY MINE ONCE MORE. NO LONGER A PRIEST HERE. A BARON THERE.* ALL *LEÓN’S CHILDREN BE NOW MINE. THIS BE A NEW NIGHT, AFTER ALL.*’

“He fixed me with those eyes, deep and perilous as the sea.

“‘*HAIL ITS NEW KING.*’

“I stalked a little closer, the fingertips of my right hand brushing against a weight in my hem—the second vial of Dior’s blood, still hidden in the stitching.

“‘There’s only one king among your kind,’ I hissed. ‘It was Fabién who led the attack on the Charbourg in the Wars of the Blood. Fabién who crossed the Bay of Tears and crushed Nordlund. He stands poised even now to claim the Fivefold Throne. This whole empire trembles at the mention of him. They don’t even know your *name*.’

“‘*NOR DO I WISH THEM TO. WOLVES HUNT IN PACKS. RAVENS, FLOCKS. BUT ALONE DO SERPENTS ABIDE, CHILD. I AM FATHER OF WHISPERS. ACROSS ALL ELIDAEN DOTH MY BROOD HOLD SWAY. ASHEVE. SUL ILHAM. MADEISA. LEÓN. LET FABIÉN RULE THE WASTES IN HIS WAKE. THE GET OF VOSS MAY HAVE THE CROWN. THE CHILDREN OF ILON HAVE ALREADY PLUCKED ITS JEWELS.*’

“The vampire spread his arms before the Baron and his court, that dread angel unveiled. The glow of the stained-glass windows behind him burned like fire in my mind, but in truth, his was a black majesty, and he a dark sun, surpassing all need of light and warmth. And God help me, a part of me longed to be crushed in his gravity.

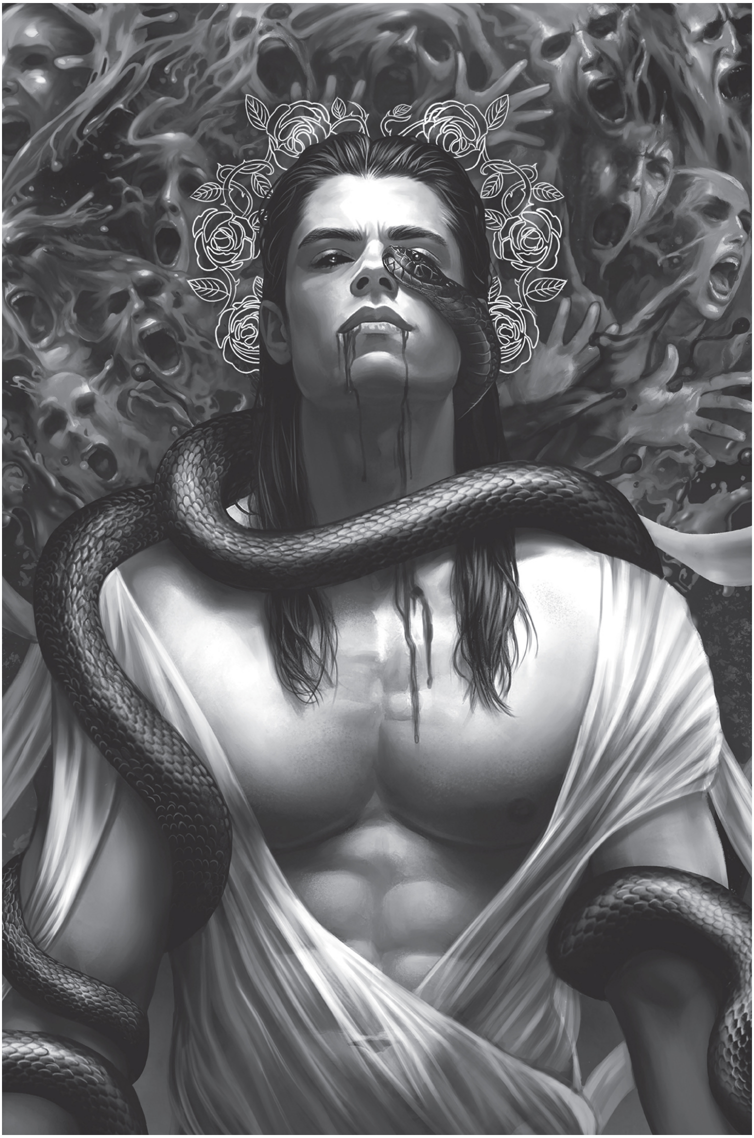
“‘Why tell me all this? What do you want?’

“‘*ALREADY HATH THY GRANDFATHER NAMED MY DESIRE, GABRIEL.*’

“He smiled then, chill trickling down my spine.

“‘*THEE.*’

"'… Why?'



"Ilon's hand rose to the man knelt before him, timeworn face upturned in adoration. The vampire gifted my grandfather's cheek a slow caress, sorrow staining his smile.

"'*WELL HATH MY BRAVE GERRARD SERVED ME. BUT VENERABLE WAS HE WHEN I CLAIMED HIM, AND E'EN BLESSED BY MY BLOOD, TIME AND TIDES SHALL RUN THEIR COURSE. SWEET CHARLOTTE HATH SERVED ME WELL, BUT SHE IS MARRED IN THE*

EYES OF MY PEOPLE. I COULD COMMAND THEM TO LOVE SHE WHO BURNED THEIR BABES IN THEIR CRADLES, NO DOUBT. BUT NO NEED NOW HATH I. NOT WHEN LEÓN ALREADY ADORES *THEE. SAVIOR OF NORDLUND. SWORD OF THE REALM.*'

"One pale hand rose toward me.

"'*COME YE NOW. SET ASIDE THY BOOTLESS QUEST, DEATHSEEKER. DEAR FABIÉN IS A MONSTER BEYOND THY KEN, AND DARKNESS ABIDES WITHIN HIM YE CANNOT HOPE TO FATHOM. NO MAN OF WOMAN BORN MAY SLAY THE FOREVER KING.*' He tilted his head, eyes boring into my soul. '*I FEEL THE* HUNGER *IN THEE. THY THIRST COME FULL TO BLOOM. ALL PASSION SHALL I INDULGE. WOMAN. MAN. GIRL. BOY. WHISPER, AND IT SHALL BE THINE. DESIRE SHALL BE THY LAW. THEIRS FOR THEE, AND THINE OWN FOR ME. FOR THERE BE NO GREATER CHAIN FORGED BY HEAVEN'S TYRANT THAN THE LIE OF LOVE.*'

"I clenched my jaw. The vampire only smiled. And lifting his wrist to pallid lips, Ilon bit deep. The scent struck me so hard I was near floored—bright, brilliant, dripping from the wound now with a cadence that mirrored my own hammering pulse.

"'*TWICE AREADY HATH YE SUPPED OF ME, DEATHSEEKER. ONE MORE DROP, AND YE MUST FALL.*'

"The beast in me *roared* as he lifted his bleeding hand; the power, the promise, the blood of one of the eldest vampires under heaven now only a few steps away. And toward it, like a blind man I stumbled. Lips already parted. Mouth flooding with spit. But against my fingertips, still I felt it in my hem; that vial of glass concealed in the stitching.

"Dior's blood.

"I glanced toward Lachlan and Baptiste, but their eyes were closed like the others'—pinned in this monster's thrall. We'd all been duped into supping of his blood; the toast at the feast, the sacrament at mass, the wine in my boudoir. I supposed they'd drunk a third time that very dusk. And though I'd not swallowed Odette's final offering that night, Ilon had poisoned *me* too—I knew it from my dreams. That serpent crawling from Celene's mouth, that fire burning her to cinders; his blood had been usurping my sister's red hold over me. But now, stumbling toward his wrist…"

"You felt nothing for him."

The Last Silversaint fell silent, gaze falling on the historian. Jean-François was writing in his tome, but as he glanced up, chocolat eyes snared in storm grey, his quill fell still.

"Oh, I felt *something,*" Gabriel replied. "Beyond thirst. Beyond madness. Ilon was the most beautiful creature I'd ever laid eyes on, coldblood. To behold him was to adore him. To be near him was to desire him. A desire I've never quite forgot."

Jean-François swallowed. "But his blood held no sway over you."

"No." The Last Silversaint sighed. "One more gift from the girl I'd failed so terribly. Dior's blood had broken Ilon's hold over me, just as it had done in Maergenn for the thralls of the Dyvok. But of course, *he* didn't know that. I suppose that's why he let me get so near. Bottomless eyes fixed on mine as I stumbled closer, sinking to my knees before my new God. The Father of Whispers smiled down at me like the end of all things, sweet oblivion in his eyes as he raised that bleeding wrist to my lips.

"'*DRINK AND BE MINE.*'

"I took hold with my left hand, his flesh smooth and cool as porcelain. And with my right, I tore my shirt's hem, rising again now, lips peeling back from my fangs as I swung that vial of blessed blood right toward that bastard's perfect smile.

"And swift as silver, he stopped me.

"I barely saw him move; so quick, he painted a blur on the air. His hand seized mine, and I screamed as my bones were crushed to powder. Ilon hauled me skyward, agony flowing down my broken arm, the vial falling from senseless fingers. Desperate, I caught it with my other hand, crushed its throat open, meaning to fling it into his face. But swifter than I could see, he smashed my blow aside. I cried out as the vial shattered, that holy blood sprayed, not onto Ilon but the pews, the flagstones, folk in the front row. And with ungodly strength, the ancien threw me backward, crashing so hard into the altar it split asunder.

"I fought back darkness, dragging my eyes open. Bloodied and broken, I lay upon those flagstones carved with the names of my ancestors, wondering if this place might become my tomb. But Ilon loomed over me, a candlelight silhouette, intent not to end but *slave* me. Seizing hold of my throat with bloodied hands, the vampire smiled.

"'*ALL THIS CITY BE MINE,*' spoke the thousands around us. '*EVERY MOTHER, EVERY CHILD, EVERY BODY IN LEÓN THAT YET DRAWS BREATH.*'

"I wheezed, managing to whisper despite my agony.

"'Shame *he* doesn't b-breathe…'

"The vampire blinked, silent question in fathomless eyes. And in answer, the stained-glass portrait of Gabriel behind us shattered into a thousand glittering pieces, and through that razored gulf, another angel flew, his name dripping from my bloody lips.'

"'Aaron…'

"He sped like an arrow, greatcoat of midnight blue and locks of spun gold streaming behind him. In his hands—still black and charred from Lachlan's ink—he wielded Epitaph, the sword of dread Nikita, taken from that ancien's still-warm ashes. And intent to add another elder to his tally, Aaron swung that dreadful blade right at Ilon's throat."

"*How?*"

The Last Silversaint blinked over his goblet, downing the remainder before replying.

"How what, Chastain?"

"How did de Coste know you were in need?" the vampire demanded.

"And after the bloody parting between you, why had he even returned to the city?"

"He never left."

Jean-François blinked, his quill fallen still once more. Gabriel took up the Monét, pouring the last of the bottle into his golden cup. And leaning back in his chair, leathers creaking, the Last Silversaint sighed, brow creased in thought.

"Listen … it's difficult to capture with simple words what all this had been like. Looking back now, it's like … squinting through smoke. Being drunk without drinking. Vampires of Voss blood can read minds, and have skins of iron. The Dyvok can break wills with their Whip, and break steel with their bare hands. You Chastain speak with the tongues of beasts, and move swifter than falcon's wings. But the Ilon…"

Gabriel shook his head.

"There's a reason they're called the *Whispers,* Historian. Theirs is a subtlety that's … difficult to explain. Your emotions aren't truly your own in the presence of their elders. Ever since we'd entered León, every part of us—our fears, our doubts, our desires—all had been wound tighter. Quicker to rage. To thirst. To lust. Wrongness in the very air, yet impossible to put a finger on. When Aaron and I were initiates in the Order, old Greyhand summed up what it was to fight the Ilon. *The hunter who cannot trust his heart can trust nothing.*

"But if a hunter is lucky, there are some things he can *always* rely on. And if in nothing else, coldblood, I was ever lucky in my choice of friends."

Gabriel lifted his goblet, swallowing deep.

"I'd been suspicious since I'd found the Fool in the cellar—saw the wax those bottles of Vin de León had been sealed in, back when my grandmama laid them down. Crumbling with age. *Red.* But the bottles they'd cracked for us at the feast, the bottles Odette had brought me in my boudoir, were sealed white."

"No flowers now left to stain it," Jean-François murmured.

"That wax was *new,*" Gabriel nodded. "Someone was tampering with the wine. My unrest deepened when Lachie started flirting with Charlotte. Echoing those words from Bishop Santiago's homily, word for word. Santiago himself flinched when I pressed my palm to his skin, like any other thrall would at the touch of silver. But by then, I already knew something truly rotten festered in that city's bones."

"How?"

"Baptiste. I'd seen him and Aaron give up all they'd ever known to be together. Their love burned bright enough to defy the Blackheart himself. And I was supposed to believe he'd willingly betray the light of his life for want of a *bite*? There was no way."

Gabriel shook his head.

"No fucking way."

"I *had* thought you were being a bloody fool telling Aaron about the infidelity."

"Not a fool, coldblood. Just a bastard. First thing I told Aaron in the stables was that he'd been right. Evil *did* dwell in that city's heart. We conjured our plan from there."

"You staged the brawl."

"Of course we did. Pretending that my only ally not yet poisoned had been stripped away from me. It made me look vulnerable. Alone." Gabriel twirled his goblet stem, lips twisted. "A clever lion feigns weakness to draw out his prey."

"But how did de Coste regain his blade?" the Marquis snapped. "It was locked in the armory, and only your cousin had the key!"

"He kicked the fucking door in, of course."

"But how did he *enter* the château without invitation?"

"I invited him."

The vampire scowled, dark eyes aflame. Gabriel only shrugged.

"It was my château too, after all. Grandpapa declared it such, before all his court."

The vampire blinked, flipping back through his tome and reading aloud.

"*My house is yours, Gabriel.*"

Jean-François leaned back in his chair. His eyes were locked on the silversaint, smoldering now as Gabriel lifted his goblet, swallowing another mouthful. And shaking his head, the historian brushed his quill over curling lips.

"Admit it," Gabriel chuckled. "I might be a bastard. But I'm a clever one on occasion."

"So clever your so-called *prey* had smashed you near to pulp."

"Well. You can't make an omelette without cracking a few heads."

Gabriel crossed one long leg over the other, scratching at the dried blood on his leathers with one ragged fingernail.

"Aaron flew like a spear, landed like a thunderbolt, walls shaking around us. All the rage in him was unleashed now; the thought that this monster had slaved his Baptiste, the sheer horror of a whole city held in thrall. But more and most, I think I knew the true heart of his fury. This was Ilon, after all. Father of Whispers. And sire, or grandsire, or somesuch, of the vampire who'd fathered Aaron. My brother had never met the monster who seduced his mama—that bastard had been slain years before. But at the root of it, the *heart* of it, the Father of Whispers was the sire of all Aaron's suffering.

"The ancien raised his hand and Epitaph sang, severing Ilon's arm at the elbow. His grip on me failed and I fell, every mouth in the cathedral now open in one long howl of pain. Ilon lashed out with his other hand—a blow so terrible, it sent Aaron crashing through one of the tree-tall pillars holding the ceiling aloft. Ancient stone blew apart like cheap crockery, shrapnel cutting into the sea of thralls, all bellowing with Ilon's rage as the gables groaned. Aaron rolled upright, splashed with blood, Epitaph yet in his fist.

"Ilon stood at the altar, broken stained glass wreathing him in the color of flame. Though his right arm was cleft at the elbow, his robes splashed with blood, still his was a fearsome beauty; the Angel of Fire unveiled, speaking with ten thousand mouths.

"'*I SMELL MY BLOOD IN THEE, CHILD.*'

"Aaron raised Epitaph, smiling over its bloody edge. 'I smell yours, too.'

"'*ALL THIS CITY BE MINE, LITTLE STRIPLING. FOOL THOU ART, TO CHALLENGE ME IN IT ALONE.*'

"'But I am *never* alone.'

"Reaching into his greatcoat, Aaron lifted a long bundle wrapped in oilcloth, flinging it toward me. I rose from the shattered steps, catching the haft, lips curling. The darkest hours of my life had been lightened by the weight of that blade in my hand, and this one was no different—slinging the oilcloth away and smiling at the silvered dame in my hands.

"*This b-b-b-be no angel, Gabriel. B-b-back to hell let us send him.*

"Aaron flung himself at Ilon, Epitaph raised high. I launched myself at the vampire's flank, Ashdrinker clutched in my one good hand. I'd no time to anoint her blade with my last vial of Dior's blood, still tucked into my collar's hem. But I needed that blood to slay Fabién and besides—this was an ancien Whisper, not an Ironheart. Aaron's blade had sheared through Ilon's elbow like piss through snow, and I aimed to make short work of this bastard; fighting side by side with my brother as we'd not done since our victory at the Twins."

In his tower, the Last Silversaint heaved a soft sigh.

"But as I say, Historian … when fighting Whispers, your heart is not truly your own. And Ilon owned every heart in that city.

"She was a girl. Maybe ten years old. Long black hair like my Patience, clad in a pretty red church dress. She stepped from among the crowd and flung herself between the vampire and me, screaming at the top of her lungs '*Don't hurt the angel!* '

"My charge faltered, more citizens rising now, throwing themselves into the breach between Ilon and Aaron and me. The whole *cathedral* had awoken as if from a dream, thousands of voices crying out in horror, hundreds of hands reaching toward me. I couldn't have fought them all even if I dared, and of course I didn't—these were innocents, thralled by Ilon's blood. Yet they fought like devils possessed, mothers and maids, priests and paupers, dragging me down, Aaron's roar lost under the din of their fury.

"'*IN THE HEART OF EVERY FATHER.*'

"Ilon gazed at me in the crush, speaking at last with his own fathoms-deep voice.

“*‘IN THE BREATH OF EVERY BABE.*’

“He stepped toward me, bloody hand rising.

“*‘IN EVERY DREAM AND DROPLET OF MY DOMAIN DO I ABIDE.*’

“Palebloods have the strength of ten men, Historian. The get of Dyvok, the strength of dozens. Yet there in the belly of Le Dôme, Aaron and I faced *thousands*. They tore Ashdrinker from my hands, pinning me like a fly in a web of grasping hands and gabbling mouths. I roared defiance, heart twisting as I saw Lachlan among them, my old ’prentice taking hold of my good arm with a grip like iron. Baptiste was with those attacking Aaron—hundreds of innocent bodies flinging themselves upon my friend.

“The sea of flesh trembled now; parting like a curtain. And before me loomed that monster, that serpent, that Whisper, once more proffering his bloody wrist.

“*‘BY MY WORD DIDST THY FOREBEAR LAY THIS CITY’S FOUNDATION. BY MY WILL WAS THIS CHURCH BUILT FROM DUST.*’ Ilon sighed, low and long. *‘I* LOVE *THIS CITY, GABRIEL DE LEÓN. AND SO SHALL THEE.*’

“‘Do you love it enough to die for it?’

The voice trembled—not with fear or sorrow, but fury. Looking past the monster’s shoulder, I saw my cousin rising behind him. Charlotte’s face was twisted with hatred, her one good eye ablaze with truth long denied, smeared sticky and red across her snarl. I realized that in smashing Dior’s blood from my hand, Ilon had sent it splashing—upon the pews, the floor, a few droplets striking folk in the front row: Charlotte, the Fool, my grandpapa. That blood was smeared upon her lips now. And in her hands, she held her sword, Lightbringer, its blade already slicked with oil as she plunged it clean through the vampire’s back.

“Lightbringer was fashioned by a genius, true, but it was no blade of enchanted starsteel. And while it pierced Ilon’s heart, Charlotte hadn’t struck its flint lest she warn her mark of her coming. She twisted the hilt to spark the blaze, but with a roar, the vampire spun, striking with his claws, Charlotte sailing through a sea of parishioners with a wail. Ilon staggered, turning slow, reaching back with red claws to drag the blade from his spine.

“But through the crush of folk, another lion rose.

“I’ve no idea what I was expecting when I met him. When I was a boy, my grandpapa had been a figure of distant hatred—an evil old cur who’d stolen my mama’s birthright. But he was no bag of bones, hollow-eyed and twisted. No, Gerrard de León was tall as I, no doubt just as broad in youth. His hands were wrinkled, but not shaking as he seized the blade in Ilon’s back, twisting the hilt as he whispered.

“‘One day as a Lion…’

“The flint struck, the oil caught, the blade at last catching fire. Ilon *screamed,* turning on my grandfather and opening his throat to the bone. I roared as the blood sprayed, as the old man fell. But those flames caught upon the angel’s robes, Ilon wailing now in terror.

“All about me, their voices were raised—that barony of thralls, howling as the fire took hold. Their hold on me loosed, their minds unmoored, the vampire’s agony rippling through his congregation. He flailed among them, claws cleaving flesh, tearing heads from necks, his faithful all brought to their knees by the terror of him.

“But not me.

“I rose from the chaos, diving across the tombstones of men who’d built this city at a devil’s command, snatching Ashdrinker off the floor. Ilon tore the flaming robes from his body, hair catching fire now, fanged maw open in a howl of such pain it shook the cracking gables above. And as I flew toward him, he fixed me with a gaze deep as forever, and whispered with a voice that almost undid me.

“*‘PLEASE, DON’T—’*

“Ashdrinker sang as she came, an aria brighter than the Empyrean choir. She sliced through flesh and bone that had endured a thousand years, cleaving Ilon’s head from his shoulders. There came a sound then, or perhaps an absence of it—a silence so deep it seemed a hymn. And as the whole world held its breath, those thousand years claimed their due, Time’s dread hand now taking hold. Perfect flesh undone, perfect smile unmade, the Father of Whispers blowing apart so violently I was thrown back like a toy, like a *boy,* crashing into the flagstones and tumbling into blackness.

“I lifted my head, body aching, bones broken. Blinking, I looked skyward, pawing at my wondering eyes. Though summer still reigned, *snow* was falling inside that cathedral, drifting from the rafters and onto the congregation below. They looked about in wonder, mothers and maids, beggars and bakers, the scales falling from their eyes. Because of course it wasn’t snow falling within Le Dôme that day, but ashes—the ashes of the monster who’d both built and slaved this city, now smote unto dust by the hands of its son.

“And daughter.

“She lay on her back in a widening puddle of red, struggling to breathe. I staggered to Charlotte’s side, kneeling now, good hand clutching hers.

“‘M-merci, c … c…’ She coughed, red and dripping. ‘… Cousin.’

“‘Aaron!’ I roared.

“My brother pushed his way through the bewildered throng, blue eyes wide.

“‘Help her!’ I demanded.

“He nodded, kneeling beside me, lifting his wrist and biting deep. The congregation was slowly coming to its senses now, women sobbing, children crying. Baptiste pushed through the throng, Lachie also, putting a hand on my shoulder and squeezing. But my eyes were fixed on Charlotte as Aaron pressed his bloodied wrist to her lips.

"But she refused to swallow.

"'Drink,' I whispered. 'The blood will cure your hurts.'

"She shook her head, turning aside. 'Enough b-blood.'

"'These folk *need* you. Grandfather is dead. Who'll rule this house if not you?'

"'You are not a fool, are you, Lionne Cendrée?' Aaron asked.

"'B-b-burn in hell. L-*leech*.'

"Aaron's gaze flickered to Lachlan. 'I can see why she likes you.'

"'Charli…' Lachlan whispered.

"My old 'prentice knelt on the flagstones, leathers slicked with blood. His aegis was aglow once more, the light of his faith rekindled now Ilon's hold had been broken.

"'I know yer shame, Charli,' Lachlan murmured, taking my cousin's hand. 'Yer rage. I know what it is to be used. To have yer bleeding heart turned against ye.'

"He shook his head, lips pressed thin.

"'Yet it's only in falling we're taught to fly. These last few days wi' ye, I've found myself wonderin' over and over what it is I live fer. And though those days have been a lie, I think I yet found some truth in them. And I wonder…'

"He squeezed her bloody fingers, swallowing hard.

"'Mebbe ye did too?'

"Charlotte met Lachlan's gaze, blood bubbling at her lips, jaw clenched tight. There was a coldness to my cousin, cruel as winter dawn. But as she looked at Lachie, I saw that frost warming, the ice on her cracking like a window of stained glass.

"And jaw clenched, breath hissing, Charlotte nodded.

"Aaron pressed his wrist to her lips again, and at last she drank, choking down his blood like poison. Though only a fledgling, Aaron was grandchild of Nikita, Priori of Dyvok, his blood deep enough to drag Charlotte back at least a little from death's shore. Her breath came a touch easier. Color slowly returned to her lips, twisting in the smallest of smiles as she gazed at Lachlan. And patting Aaron's back, I dragged myself up on trembling legs.

"Reaching into my greatcoat, I took out my pipe, loading myself a dose as I looked over the chaos around us. The congregation were still bewildered, surfacing from the deepest of nightmares. My arm was broken, the flagstones greasy with gore. Half my grandfather's court had been slain in Ilon's death throes, his poor Fool Caspién among them. Following the trail of blood, I saw the Baron then, sprawled upon the altar steps, sightless gaze fixed on the Redeemer above. Breathing red, I knelt at my grandfather's side, pressing his eyes closed. I'd not known the old man long, but I'd still seen something of myself in him, wondering what we might've been had my mama …

"'Mama,' I murmured.

"I reached inside my grandfather's coat, and there I found it; a thin book, bound in leather, the sigil of our house embossed upon the cover with the initials *A.L.*

"My mother's journal.

"I flicked through the pages, soaked with red. I saw Mama's handwriting, penned over thirty years ago and yet immortal. And amid the running ink and blood, I saw a name.

"*Wulfric*.

"'Gabe?'

"I turned at the voice, inhaling another lungful of the sacrament's bittersweet warmth. Aaron stood with Baptiste beside him, not quite close enough to touch. Lachlan knelt with Charlotte, her head cradled in his lap. But he fixed me with kohled green eyes, voice ringing on the broken gables overhead, the broken altar beneath.

"'What do we do now, brother?'

"'I told you already.'

"I rose with a wince.

"Tucked the journal inside my coat.

"'I have a king to kill.'"

XV

IN NOTHINGNESS

“I STOOD AT my bedchamber window, the weight of the world in my hand.

“The vial was barely a palmful; heavy, treated glass, its stopper etched with the sevenstar. I stared at the bounty, the gift, the *weapon* therein. The blood of the Holy Grail. My heart still ached at Dior’s loss, tinged with dread now—this was the last drop that remained of her. All I had left to slay the Forever King. The beast in me growled as I hefted that leaden weight in my hand, muted sunlight glittering on that beautiful red, *red, RED*.

“The vision her blood had shown me still haunted my mind; that star to the south, that awful black hand to the north. Yet still, my eye was drawn ever eastward, toward the dawn where *he* awaited. And sheathing the vial in a sleeve of iron—the most precious jewel in this whole realm now—I hung it about my neck and whispered my vow.

“‘*Fabién.*’

“All around the château, preparations had been underway for days. I could hear them in the falling dusk, tilting my head to listen. Long had the City of Lions kept its gates sealed, its eyes turned inward, ignoring the Emperor’s pleas for aid. But now, a great host was being mustered, all of León unleashed. Soldiers outfitted with hauberks of mail and mechwork crossbows, marching in formation through the courtyard under Lachie’s watchful eye, Aaron’s cold stare, Baptiste’s hopeful smile.

“I could hear Charlotte calling to her capitaines, her quartermasters. Though the commonfolk of León still whispered at my cousin’s back, now they spoke not of butchery, but *bravery*. The Ashen Lioness, who along with her cousin had lit a fire upon the skin of an angel, and helped liberate this city from hell.

"Ashdrinker rested in my scabbard; as comforting a weight as ever. I drew her slow, listening to the hymn of starsteel, a little more discordant than it had been. I held her in my hand—my silvered dame, my loyal friend—studying the words etched down her length that only she and I knew the meaning of. The crack was still evident, the hairline running halfway down her length. But at its root, three fine welds were burned into Ash's skin, halting the rupture in its tracks. The mend's craftsmanship was masterful, Forgemaster Cortez true to his word. I knew she'd never be what she was, but perhaps …

"*I shall b-b-be enough.*

"I smiled at her silver song, ringing in my mind. My heart ached at what had become of my friend, and all for love of me. But I kissed her brow, whispering in kind.

"'You've *always* been enough. We started down this road together. And together, we'll reach its end.'

"*I would not have it s-s-s-so, my friend. When all this is donedonedone, I would look down from my eternal reward at the life that is thine, and smile. I would have ye live, Gabriel. For m-me.*

"'A fine hope. But this isn't a children's tale, Ashdrinker.'

"I sheathed my blade, loosed my grip on her haft.

"'No happy endings.'

"'Chevalier?'

"I turned at the voice, small and soft, edged with a hint of fear. I found Odette standing at my doorway, eyes downturned, hands clasped before her. The maidservant was clad in the blue of lost skies, dark curls spilling over her shoulders, down her décolletage. Her moonstime was long passed, the scent of her blood faded, but I could still recall that heavenly scent, my eyes snared on that black choker about her throat.

"The beast in me growled.

"I slammed the cage door shut. *Tight.*

"'Merci, Mlle Odette. But I've no need for you to turn down my sheets tonight.'

"'No, I…'

"The maidservant wrung her hands, falling silent as two houseguards marched past in the corridor outside. Lips thin, she shut the door, gaze yet fixed on the floorboards.

"'I wish to … apologize, Chevalier de León.'

"'Godssakes, mademoiselle, what do you have to be sorry about?'

"'The … the way I behaved. The things I said to you.' She lifted those dark eyes, but couldn't hold my gaze. 'That *monster,* he … he *bade* me bring his blood to you. I'd never have … Oh, I beg God you forgive me, Chevalier, I knew n—'

"'Nono, peace, mademoiselle,' I told her gently. 'Know no shame. His blood had hold of you, and all León beside you. If anything, it's *I* who should be asking forgiveness of *you*.'

"'… For what?'

"'The way I spoke … I frightened you. I'm sorry.'

"'You're not so frightening as all that.' Odette smiled, risking another glance. 'And you saved every soul in this city, Chevalier. No matter how loudly you might protest, you're every bit the hero they sing about in your songs.'

"'I'm no hero, chérie. Believe me.'

"I looked out the window, to the soldiers mustering in the courtyard below. Square jaws and bright eyes and unscarred blades, many too young to even shave.

"'But I know a few.'

"The maidservant stepped closer, my eyes drawn back to hers. Even freed from the workings of Ilon's blood, I could see it in her now, as I saw it often. That dark and perilous *wanting*. Like I said, some loathe we palebloods, Historian. Others adore us.

"But none ignore us.

"'What was it you said to me?' she asked. 'About what people see in you? Darkness not deep enough to drown in? Fire to be danced near, but not burned by?'

"Odette brushed a lock of hair back from her throat, and I found my eyes fixed on the prize beneath. Milk-white skin, encircled by black lace, pulse thudding quicker.

"Again the beast within me roiled. But again, I slammed that cage shut."

High in the tower of Sul Adair, the Last Silversaint sighed.

"I *swear* it."

Jean-François glanced up from his tome, fixing Gabriel in his gaze. He could see the miles and years hung on the man's frame, a weight bearing him too soon into the earth. But more now, beyond the grind of time, the lead of guilt, the historian caught a glimpse of truest darkness; of madness profound and thirst unbound, welling now in the blood-red scrawl across the Last Silversaint's eyes.

"… Gabriel?"

"I nodded to the door," he said. "Bidding her farewell. Odette smiled softly, shoulders slumping as she acknowledged defeat. Taking that last step across the gulf between us, she placed one gentle hand upon my cheek.

"'You're sweet,' she sighed. 'I hope you find—'

"And she froze then, like a doe in hunter's sights. For as she pressed that hand to my face, I felt the warmth of her, like a gaff into my skin. I felt the want in her, like claws in my belly. But most, I felt the *beat* of her, hypnotic, pressed against my cheek but reverberating through my whole body, rising like a wave tall enough to blot out every star in heaven.

"And my fingers closed around her wrist.

"Odette's breath caught, eyes gone wide as my mouth brushed against that pulse, hot upon her skin. Her heartbeat quickened as my lips slipped closer, pressed gently to that silk-soft white, that cerulean scrawl beneath. I could smell her desire, washing over and through me like no holy water could, swallowing me whole. And though I'd no wish for this woman to be the cliff I plunged over, I knew I must now do the same.

"Swallow. Her. Whole.

"As my fangs pierced her skin, Odette almost fell, overcome with the bliss of the Kiss. Her blood crashed upon my tongue like a tempest, smashing all resolve to splinters. A long, low moan slipped her lips, rising from somewhere deep and dark, her knees buckling. I caught her up to stop her fall, enveloping her in my arms. Her free hand clutched my shirt, tearing at the ties, and her lips met my skin, a waterfall of breathless kisses spilling down my chest. Her hand slipped lower to fumble with my belt. But even as she dragged me free, caressing, *adoring,* still I drank, all want of flesh consumed by the need of blood.

"'Sweet Lion,' she breathed. 'Would you lie among my leaves?'

"I barely remember throwing her onto the bed. Rucking up her dress and descending to the shadow between her thighs, already wet and warm as summer rain. I spread her with my fingertips, the honeyed taste of her temple not holding a candle to her blood. And yet, I *devoured* that woman, Odette grabbing my hair and pulling me tighter, hips swaying, chest heaving as she struggled simply to breathe. She gasped as she felt my thumb, parting her petals and sinking deep, hot and tight and slick. But it was not until I lifted my mouth from her lips and sought my *true* prize that she cried out, head thrown back and hips lifting off the bed as I sank my teeth deep into her thigh.

"I drank again, that beast in me roaring, *reveling,* wanting only more, only this, only *all*. The flood arterial, hot and thick and bright with iron's tang, all of life's symphony now ringing in the hollow of my chest and rushing out into my raging cock, through every tingling finger's tip. I might never have stopped had she not sunk her nails into my skin, vicious, the pain slicing through the want and dragging me momentarily to surface.

"'Take me,' she gasped. 'God, fuck me, *please*.'

"I rose up, hissing through razored teeth, red dripping from my smile as I tore that choker from her throat. Odette reached down, took hold, hand sliding over my burning length as she set me where she needed me to be. One thrust, one bite, her every muscle stretched taut, her every heartbeat mine to own, her nails raking down my back and her legs wrapped tight around me, sunk hilt-deep but begging me to go deeper, harder, *more*. My whole world was washed crimson as my teeth pierced her throat, the song of our bodies colliding, her voice calling my name, all lost beneath the impossible flood of her heartbeat, plunging all I was and would ever be into nothingness."

The Last Silversaint leaned forward, elbows to knees.

"And that's where I left her."

Jean-François glanced up from his history, quill falling still. Silence filled the room, a quiet so deep that the sound of the silversaint's galloping heart seemed deafening. The vampire fixed him in his gaze, but he refused to meet it.

"In nothingness?"

Gabriel lifted his goblet, spilling the last few drops onto his tongue.

But he made no reply.

"… Gabriel?"

"I'm thirsty, coldblood."

"Are you telling me you killed—"

"I'm telling you I'm *thirsty*."

The historian pursed his lips, looking his prisoner up and down. "I have told you once, and I shall tell you again. My Empress wishes the whole of your tale."

The silversaint snarled, soft and deadly.

"What did you do to sweet little Odette, Gabriel?"

"Goddamn you, get me a FUCKING *DRINK*!"

The Last Silversaint rose from his chair, seizing the empty bottle on the table. He flung it into the wall, shattering into a thousand glittering shards as he flashed toward the historian. Hands sinking into the armrests, looming up into the vampire's face, he snarled with razored teeth, glowered with burning eyes.

"Your Empress gives not one drop of piss what I did to that woman. And you're no priest, that you might shrive me of my sins. I'll not spill my guts so you might bathe in the slop, Chastain. So get me a *fucking drink,* before I take one from *you*."

Spittle flecked the silversaint's lips, madness boiled in the red of his eyes. But Jean-François remained perfectly still as he stared at the man, the myth, the monster unveiled. The door burst open, Capitaine Delphine and a cadre of thrallswords spilling over the threshold with blades drawn. But the Marquis Jean-François, historian of the Empress Margot Chastain, raised one alabaster hand.

"Stand down, Capitaine."

The big man glowered, eyes drifting between Marquis and madman.

"Are you cert—"

"Quite certain. Await me outside, Delphine."

The capitaine stared at Gabriel like wolf to bleeding lamb, but the silversaint ignored him, eyes still fixed on Jean-François's. With clear reluctance, the thrallswords did as commanded, blades sliding home, plate armor clunking as they retreated but slowly from the room. The vampire spoke then, soft as smoke, their lips just a breath apart.

"If you wished to intimidate me, Gabriel, it was a mistake to reveal your heart's desire. While I've no doubt we'd both *delight* in any attempt to slake your thirst on me, we each of us know you'll not risk throwing your life away until you've seen your sister die."

Gabriel blinked, the rage in his eyes softening.

Jean-François smirked, leaning even closer as he whispered.

"I'm *also* quite a clever bastard on occasion."

Their lips almost touched as the historian chuckled softly, chocolat eyes locked on storm grey. A dozen heartbeats passed before the silversaint eased back. But so he did, muscles unknotted, fists unclenched, glass crunching beneath his boots as he sank back into his chair. Brushing a lock of hair from his lips, Gabriel nodded.

"You have your moments, vampire."

"Meline?"

At the Marquis's call, his faithful thrall appeared in the doorway, hands clasped before her. She was clad in a wondrous gown of black velvet and lace, skirts spilling in a black flood to the glass-strewn flagstones. Her eyes were downturned, but she risked a small glance at the silversaint, lips twisting at his subjugation.

"Master?"

"Fetch our guest another bottle, love. His tongue grows parched, and we must leave him *some* amusement before we bid him adieu." That maddening smirk only widened. "I doubt Dario has recovered from Chevalier de León's affections quite yet."

The maidservant bowed, retreating from the cell once more. Gabriel lifted his chin, fingers drumming on his leathers as he regarded his jailor.

"Adieu?"

The historian was already packing his history away, the great tome closed, the golden quill cleaned with usual fastidiousness. "I've noticed your temper grows frayed when you grow wearied, Gabriel. Methinks you've earned a breather for now. There's yet more to your tale, of course, but another waits in this tower with a story to tell."

The silversaint's eyes flashed, rage setting fire to cool storm grey.

"I've no idea why you bother. Every breath Celene steals is drawn only to lie."

"Because your dear sister knows the path the Grail walked after *you* walked away from her in Maergenn." The vampire chuckled, rising to his feet and straightening his cravat. "And because she hates you almost as much as you hate her.”

“I didn’t walk away from Dior. I thought she was dead. And what came next … I didn’t mean for *any* of it to happen.”

The Last Silversaint lowered his gaze, shoulders slumping as he whispered.

“I’m sorry.”

Jean-François arched one pale eyebrow in question.

“For losing my temper just now,” Gabriel replied. “For attacking you the first night we spoke. You and I aren’t friends, Jean-François. We aren’t anything close. But for all the depths of the gulf between us, we *do* have one thing in common.”

“Indeed?”

“We’re both playthings of Margot Chastain.”

The vampire sneered, turning swift on his embroidered heel.

“*And the heavens grew red as heartsblood. And the tempest cracked the sky. And the rain was like to the tears of all the winged host fallen*.”

Jean-François turned back to Gabriel, fingers steepled at his lips as he recited.

“*Those priests of* gods false *and* covenants broken*, numbering all the fingers on hell’s burning hand did stand in bleak amazement. And the Redeemer raised his eyes to his Almighty Father’s throne, and his heart did stain the bones of the earth, and with voice akin to thunder, he cried…”*

“*By this blood shall we have life eternal,*” Jean-François finished.

“The things you’re about to learn, vampire…”

Gabriel shrugged, leathers creaking as he leaned back in his chair.

“Well … if you’ve wish to talk afterward, you know where to find me.”

Jean-François only scoffed. With a whisper of velvet, the soft perfume of ashwood and desire, Meline stepped back into the room, a golden platter on her hand. The historian watched the silversaint watching *her,* leaning forward and setting down another bottle of Monét before him. Gabriel’s eyes roamed her slender wrists, drifting over the pale, delicious swells above her corset to the pulse hammering down her throat. As his majordomo met the silversaint’s eyes, the historian saw her suppress a shiver.

Some loathe us. Others adore us. But none ignore us.

“I could bid Meline keep you company if you wish?” the historian offered, chocolat eyes twinkling. “You might get lonely up here all by yourself?”

The silversaint lifted the bottle, cracking the wax seal with his thumbnail.

“Merci, coldblood. But I’ve company aplenty for now.”

“Drink slowly, Gabriel,” Jean-François warned. “I may be some time in hell.”

“No fear, mon ami.”

Gabriel smiled bitterly, filling his goblet to the brim.

“I have patience.”

The historian turned, sweeping from the cell in a flurry of dark silk and hawk feathers. Meline followed, Delphine locking the ironbound door behind them.

Reaching into his pocket, the Marquis set one of his familiars on the stone—little Claudia, her whiskers twitching, black eyes gleaming. And leaving her to watch within, a cadre of men on guard without, he strode down the tower stairs, Meline and Delphine and a dozen other thrallswords following in his wake.

The Marquis was troubled, of course; the silversaint's barbs about his dam striking a little too close to home. But he'd precious little time to brood on it. Descending the tower, he was joined by another pair of thralls, a large ironbound chest between them. He could hear Margot's feast with the Dyvok underway, voices murmuring beneath the hymns of a choir of castrati, their song ringing on the gables overhead. Reaching the grand hallway below the tower, Jean-François could smell the perfume of wrists opened into golden goblets, of powdered flesh and dew-damp thighs. He wondered if he had time to slip inside and snatch a cheeky bite; his mother's morsels were always choice. He pondered the finale of the silversaint's story, picturing Gabriel writhing naked upon crumpled sheets, sinking hilt-deep into his victim, Meline's skin prickling as he glanced toward her.

"Oh, *there* you are," came a bright voice. "Godmorrow, uncle."

Jean-François stopped, thralls arrayed behind him, staring at the figure gliding on gilded heels down the red carpet toward him. A tall and stately woman, her skin pale as new alabaster. Long golden hair was woven about her brow in a beautiful wreath, her magnificent gown spilling to the floor in crimson waves. In the crook of one arm, she held a tiny puff of fluff—some breed of Elidaeni terrier more kin to rat than hound.

"Viscontessa Nicolette. How now, sweet niece?"

"Je vais bien, Marquis, merci beaucoup." The woman dropped into a *perfect* curtsey, her Elidaeni accent prim and nobleborn. "Apologies for my interruption, you seem on your way somewhere and my *God,* that frockcoat is *ab*solutely *fabulous*."

"Merci."

The Marquis stood silently, waiting for his blood-niece to state her business. But Nicolette remained silent, brow slightly arched, head slightly tilted.

"Your gown is also lovely," Jean-François finally said.

"Oh, *this* dusty rag." The Viscontessa waved him off, chuckling. "It's almost older than this castle. Between you and me, I was honestly thinking of giving it to one of my thralls."

The little dog fixed beady eyes on the Marquis and let out a small, high-pitched bark. Nicolette pressed one pale hand to the beast's snout, tutting.

"*Hush* now, Henri, this is Uncle Jean-François. You know him."

"What can I do for you, sweet niece?"

Nicolette dropped into another curtsey, the dog now becalmed.

"Apologies, as I say. But dear Grandmama asked me to seek you out."

The Marquis's lips curled in a smile that belied his mood. Jean-François *disliked* Nicolette, you see. In fact, the only thing that stopped him outright *hating* her was that to do so would be to grant his young blood-niece far more attention than she was worth. He disliked Nicolette's velvet voice. Her pretty face. Her far-too-modern and admittedly striking sense of fashion. He disliked that she was nobleborn. That when she said *between you and me,* what she actually meant was *between you and me and anybody else who stands still long enough for me to tell them*. But if there was one thing Jean-François loathed about the young viscontessa more than any other, it was her insistence upon using *that* word.

Grandmama.

As if the Undying Empress of Wolves and Men were some moon-faced mortal sow, all blotchy jowls and saggy teats. As if the Priori Chastain, First of the Shepherds, the eldest vampire that yet walked this earth plotted her conquests from within the bounds of a rocking chair, sewing needles in lap and grandsprogs wiggling about her feet.

Grandmama.

Honestly …

"And what would our Empress Undying have of me?" Jean-François asked.

"She asks how your inquiries with the Last Silversaint fare."

The Marquis pursed his lips, reading between the lines as he began walking again.

"The Draigann was correct, then. Dame Kestrel and the Voss draw near."

"Do they?" Nicolette fell into step beside him, that fluffy rat clutched at her bosom. "I confess I'd not heard. Although between you and me, uncle, the longer she takes to arrive, the greater my sense of contentment. Do you think it's true what they say about her?"

"And what, pray tell, do they say?"

"Oh, come, surely you've heard the tales." Nicolette slipped her arm into Jean-François's, whispering in conspiratorial fashion. "It's said the Iron Maiden has slain *ten thousand* men. That there is no Ironheart more fearsome in battle than Kestrel Voss."

"Well, you would know, sweet niece," Jean-François replied, bristling at her too-familiar touch. "You were ambassador to the Forever King's court."

"Well, oui, but I didn't accompany them onto the *field.* God, can you imagine?"

"I admit, I cannot."

"Of course not, you're a civilized person." Nicolette squeezed his arm fondly. "All that ghastly *screaming.* And the *smell.* God, did you know mortal soldiers actually soil themselves when they die? Some fill their britches before the battle even *begins*."

"How gauche."

"God, I *know*. You think they'd learn to perish with a little dignity. Tsk. *Cows*. Honestly, the blood's lovely, but I find most of the bodies holding it utterly repugnant. That's not to say some aren't pretty, of course, but—" Nicolette stopped suddenly, eyes gone wide. "Oh, my *God,* I near forgot to ask! How's the new one working out? That strapping young Nordish thing I plundered on the way home? Dario was his name, oui? He's a little dim from memory, but he's got a *magnificent* cock—"

"Your gift was well received, sweet niece. Merci."

"Received?" Nicolette slapped his arm, agape. "You surprise me, uncle. I'd have thought him the receiver and you the giver, how positively *scandalous*."

Jean-François's smile was blade-thin. "Quite."

Nicolette's smile faded then, and she glanced at Meline and the thralls behind before lowering her voice. "I wanted to thank you again, by the by. For your kind words in Grandmama's ear. I'd have thought bringing her the prizes I did, she'd have showered me in gratitude, but between you and me, she actually seemed a little cross. Kept going on and on about that wretched *girl* just like Lord Fabién did, God, she wasn't *that* pretty."

"It was my pleasure. Les liens du sang, c'est sacré."

Nicolette squeezed Jean-François's arm again, pressing painted lips to his cheek. But her smile soon died with the light in her eyes. The pair had reached a set of huge ironbound doors, wrought with the likeness of Mahné and Phaedra: the twin angels of Death and Fear. A quartet of thrallswords in Chastain livery stood guard before them, stepping aside as the Marquis and his party approached. Looking up at the bas-reliefs, Nicolette's lips parted, and were her pretty face not already bloodless, Jean-François was sure she'd have blanched.

"Oh. You're going … down *there*?"

"Would you like to accompany us?"

The Viscontessa laughed then, slightly brittle and a touch too loud. "Oh, I'd love nothing more, merci. You know how I *adore* your company, uncle. But I should return to the bloodfeast. Grandmama is waiting for news."

"Are you certain?" Jean-François raised one brow. "It was *you* who captured the Last Liathe, after all. And her wretched brother. You've no wish to gloat over foes fallen?"

"… No."

Nicolette swallowed again, shaking her head.

"No, uncle. I most surely don't."

Little Henri growled, trembling as he felt his mistress's trepidation. Nicolette's deep blue eyes were fixed on Phaedra; dark wings outspread, a goblet and morning star held in the angel's grim hands. The Marquis patted his niece's arm.

"Très bien. Tell our Empress Undying then, the task is in hand. Well do I know the stakes at play here. I shall not fail her, nor this house. I vow it."

His blood-niece said nothing, eyes still fixed upon the Angel of Fear.

"… Nicolette?"

The Viscontessa blinked, dropping into a less than perfect curtsey this time.

"As it please you, uncle."

She glanced at the doors once more, little Henri growling.

"Be careful down there."

Nicolette turned with a swish of bloody velvet, departing swiftly down the grand corridor. At a nod from Jean-François, the guards unsealed the doors, a set of broad stairs waiting beyond. Torches were lit, the Marquis turning his back upon those hateful flames, and together, he and his company descended, the contents of that ironbound chest *chink*ing and *clink*ing as they walked. This path was familiar now—a black spiral, twisting into the lightless labyrinth beneath Sul Adair—but familiarity brought Jean-François no peace of mind, and any amusement at Nicolette's discomfort was soon swallowed by his own. This was the darkest prison in the empire. An oubliette, to hold a monster more worthy of the name than any under heaven.

Last of the Liathe.

They stood before tall stone doors now, sealed with silver chains. The Marquis watched his majordomo open the padlock, wincing at the burn of silver on her skin. Jean-François nodded to Delphine, the capitaine and five of his swords pushing the doors apart. And with his precious tome beneath one arm, the historian stepped into the cell beyond.

Rough walls. Damp stone. Utterly lightless. The only sound was an underground river, rushing in the darkness ahead, and the only sensation, a cold prickling on the back of his neck. Jean-François proceeded inside, torchlight cutting the gloom; the small table upset on its side by the river's edge, the armchair overturned beside it, the broken chymical globe. Meline began setting all aright, trying not to look at the thing waiting across the river. But Jean-François could see her now, melting from the dark like a wraith, standing on the light's cusp and fixing him with eyes black as the waters between.

"Godmorrow, sinner."

The words were a whisper, soft with menace, yet the monster speaking them looked anything but. She was slender, slight; a maid trapped forever at the moment of her murder. Her eyes were black as midnight, hair too, straight as blades and spilling over thin shoulders shrouded in a crimson frockcoat, fine enough for an emperor's court. Her face was stark in the gloom, but where once her jaws had been trapped behind a cage of silver, all mangled flesh and naked bone, they were now unveiled, and whole. The cage smashed loose as her brother tried to kill her, and her old wounds undone by …

… Well. Only she and the Almighty knew *that* tale.

“Mlle Castia,” the Marquis nodded. “Bonsoir.”

The Last Liathe inclined her head, looking him over like wolf to doe.

“I am surprised to see you here.”

“I am full of surprises, mademoiselle.”

A soft chuckle rang in the dark. “I thought you would starve me for at least a night or two as punishment. You do *so* enjoy your punishments, don’t you, Jean-François?”

“Some less than others. Your company, for example.”

A small smile curled her mouth, gaze softened by what felt like … *affection*. Her eyes roamed his retinue; the hulking thrallswords with their burning brands and oaken chest, his majordomo with her black velvet brocade, armed only with a golden platter, a goblet, and a bottle of green glass. But it was upon *her* the monster’s black gaze now settled. Meline had set the chair and table aright, the bottle and goblet upon it, taking up her place at her master’s side once more. But Jean-François felt her stiffen as the monster stared, midnight eyes narrowing to slits, bloodless lips pressed thin.

“The Draigann,” Celene whispered.

“Stay out of her head,” Jean-François spat. “Or I *will* leave you down here to starve.”

Celene blinked, and Meline moaned, swaying a little on her feet. Thrallswords came forward, dragging the woman away as the Last Liathe turned her gaze back on the Marquis.

“Well, we both know *that* isn’t true.”

“Are you calling me a liar? *Black! Black!* cried the kettle to the pot?”

Celene smiled again, brushing one dark lock from her face. “Margot’s great convocation,” she said wistfully. “Come at last to pass. It could not have been easy to lure those flies into her web. One wonders what bait the Empress used. But *do* pass on our congratulations to your dam for her achievement, little Marquis. Unless … you might convince her to come down here so I could deliver commendation personally?”

“You walk a dangerous line, mademoiselle.”

“Some might say I dance on it, sinner.”

“You lied to me about Lachance.”

“I told you she was dead. And so she was.”

“And yet she lived.”

That smile faltered then, that black gaze falling to the waters.

“We both know *that* isn’t true.”

“*Do* we.”

Jean-François snapped his fingers. At his signal, the thrallswords carrying the ironbound chest stepped forward, setting their burden on the rocky shore. The Liathe watched as they opened the lid, revealing dozens upon dozens of clay pots within.

“What is that?” she asked.

The Marquis bent down, hefted one of the pots. It was the size of a large melon, heavy as stone, the clay glazed a deep ocean blue and sealed with hemp-bound cork. And without a word, the Marquis hurled the pot at Celene’s head.

She moved, effortless, her greatcoat leaving a crimson blur on the air behind. The pot sailed harmlessly by, shattering with a *bang* and spilling its contents upon the cold stone. Slick. Viscous. Gleaming like gold and smelling like …

“Lamp oil,” she realized.

Another *bang* rang out in the cell, another, *another,* the Marquis standing back as his thralls hurled pot after pot across the river. Not a one struck Celene of course—far too swift, far too clever—slipping between the hail of falling clay like a knife between ribs. But the stone beneath her feet was soon coated with oil, a few droplets splashed upon her knee-high boots, agleam with the reflections of torches. They were lined up on the shore now; a dozen men with burning brands in hand, poised to throw them across the gulf.

“You *are* the liar your brother names you, Mlle Castia. But upon some matters, you’ve given me truth.” Jean-François’s lips twisted. “Your fear of fire, for example.”

Midnight eyes fixed Jean-François, gleaming wide.

“You wouldn’t…”

“You’re the one who can read thoughts, mademoiselle. So look upon mine now and tell me true.” The historian stepped to the water’s edge, glowering. “Would I not?”

Celene fixed Jean-François in her gaze, mute as oil-slicked stone.

“You are in the deepest, darkest pit in my Empress’s realm,” the Marquis hissed. “Those fools who claimed you friend are slain. Those fables you pinned your hopes to are unwound. And the only living man you might call kin has already sold himself at the prospect of seeing you butchered like the *pig* he names you.”

She tensed at that, lips peeling back from her fangs.

“Gabriel.”

“Your brother has betrayed you. In the tower just above your head, he has spent the last few hours comfortably sipping the finest of my dam’s cellars and singing like a lark. And the only spur I gave to his song was the promise he might watch you die.”

The Last Liathe snarled, black eyes agleam.

“*Bastard.*”

"And proud. *Better,* as he so often claims, *to be a bastard than a fool.* But you are *both* fools if you believe I'll not light that stone beneath your feet and watch you truly dance should you not give me what I want." The Marquis lifted his chin now, all his wrath unveiled. "I am sick to the eyeteeth of your insults, whelp. Your smug little barbs. Your imbecilic delusion that you are in any way in control here. I am your elder *and* your better. All the power within your veins has been stolen, not earned. All the coin you have wagered is pyrite, not gold. And I will suffer your temerity not one breath longer."

Jean-François swept his coat aside and sat himself in the leatherbound armchair. Meline placed another chymical globe on the table beside him, opening the bottle and filling his goblet to the brim. As the scent of fresh blood kissed the air, the Marquis crossed his legs and placed his history in his lap, smoothing down a new page.

"You will tell me of the Grail. Of Mother Maryn. Of all that transpired after Lachance's so-called death at the hands of the Heartless. If you try to deceive me, you burn. If I *suspect* you are trying to deceive me, you burn. If you insult me, you burn. I am Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain, Historian of Margot Chastain, First and Last of Her Name, Undying Empress of Wolves and Men. And *I* have had enough of *your* shit."

Celene's eyes roamed the oil at her feet, rising to the torches in the soldiers' hands, settling at last on Jean-François.

And slowly, she inclined her head.

"Well played, seigneur."

"Believe me when I tell you, Mlle Castia, this is no bloody game."

From his coat, the Marquis produced a wooden case carved with two wolves, two moons. He drew a quill from within, black as the row of feathers adorning his shoulders, placing a small bottle upon the armrest of his chair. Dipping quill to ink, Jean-François looked up with dark and expectant eyes.

Celene drew a deep breath, the taste of lamp oil in the air.

"Begin," the vampire said.

BOOK TWO

THE NINE LIVES OF CELENE CASTIA

And so ended the dark year of Empire 676, wherein the Fivefold Throne of Elidaen was beset by every manner of strife. Fair Ossway fallen to the Untamed, golden Sūdhaem ravaged by the Shepherds, no word out of Talhost since the Forever King crushed Vellene a score of years prior. Summer winds whispered of brief respite; of melting rivers and Dead armies halted upon raging shores. But what would come with winter?

Who would come?

—Luis Bettencourt
A Complete Historie of Elidaen

I

SHE IS RISEN

"I WAS NEVER one to believe in miracles, seigneur."

The stink of oil hung thick in the air, thrallswords with flaming torches poised on the dark shoreline. But the Last Liathe had found a relatively dry patch of ground, sweeping back her fine, bloodstained coat and sitting cross-legged upon the stone. Pale fingers were steepled at her lips, dark eyes on the water. As she began speaking, soft under the river's song, Jean-François did his best to hide his smug smile.

"The Testaments tell of them," Celene said. "The histories, too. San Antoine parting the Eversea. The Redeemer laying the army of King Thaddeus low with a single stroke of his blade. Even my dear brother's victory over Fabién's legions at the Battle of the Twins. But no matter how oft I heard tell of them, life had taught me one lesson, sure and true.

"Miracles were as myths for the likes of me.

"So as we hung, limp and almost bloodless in the arms of dread Mother Maryn, I was certain I was about to die. Maryn's body was that of a child, only six or seven when she was murdered, clad in rotting robes of black. But her strength was like *nothing* we had known, rising from her coffin and seizing hold of me as if I weighed a feather. Her eyes were dark as the voids between the stars, her teeth sharper than any sword, sinking into our throat. And as she drank me down, I felt the colossal *emptiness* inside her—the drought-dry wanting of a century spent in slumber, set to devour me whole."

Celene paused a handful of heartbeats, shaking her head.

"I cannot tell you I was unafraid. The agony and bliss were … *unspeakable*. I could feel my essence being ripped from its moorings; the Angel of Death flinging his pale arms wide. Yet even though my body would be destroyed, the teachings of Illia herself, First of the Faithful, promised that my soul would be spared with this communion. Carried within Maryn's body until the Day of Judging, just as I carried all those *I* had consumed in turn. I could hear their voices now, clambering inside me; a choir of all those I had devoured over my years, singing the same dread refrain.

"*Now you see, Celene Castia.*

"*Now you understand what you did to us.*

"And then, just as sudden as she'd begun, Maryn stopped drinking.

"We hung in her arms, drained near to dying, a sack of rags and twigs. And she lifted her mouth from the wreckage of our throat, locks of brine-sodden blond plastered to her skin as her bottomless eyes rose up, up to the ceiling. To the crypt they had laid the Grail inside, the Tomb of the Mothermaid in the Cathedral cellar, far above our heads.

"The Red Hand of God, they'd named her. La demoiselle du Graal. But more and most, the whisper that had become a cry that had become a hymn was a simple one, and true, spilling from Maryn's lips now in a bloodstained whisper.

"'*San Dior.*'

"Maryn released her dreadful grip, dropping us into the brine at her feet. We could smell old gore in the seawater, see the stone coffin she had risen from, still stained with the ancien blood that had awakened her. Statues of the First Five loomed above us—those priests of gods false and covenants broken, gathered around the messiah they had murdered. Maryn's eyes narrowed at the sight of them, gaze drifting over those sigils about their necks—raven and bear and serpent and wolves and skulls. And then, she looked to me.

"'*Who art thou?* '

"Her voice was lilting, childlike, utterly at odds with those bottomless eyes, that ravenous maw. But I could feel the *power* in her, remember the strength of her arms, the depth of her thirst, and though she seemed a child, I was near speechless with terror.

"'Celene,' we managed. 'L-liathe of d-dread Wulfric.'

"'*Wulfric. Where be our brother in blood?* '

"We clenched our teeth, the souls we carried clambering up within us now, one louder than the rest, screaming with shapeless rage at she who had undone him.

"'He is gone to his final rest,' we whispered, crawling to our knees. 'Jènoah also.'

"Maryn's shoulders sagged at that, and she pressed one small hand to her chest. It seemed for a moment she was truly a child then, a moan of such grief and pain slipping her lips that our heart twisted at the sound. I saw tears of the blood she had just drunk from our own still-bleeding throat rolling down her cherub's cheeks.

"*'How? '*

"The voice within me roared, demanding confession. Contrition. But I dragged myself to my feet, dripping seawater and blood. And steeling my own resolve, I pushed him back down to the dark where he dwelled. I was master here, not he. *Little Mountain,* my papa used to call me. Iron rusts. Ice melts. But I was Celene Castia.

"And I was made of *stone*.

"'Jènoah left a note in his own blood upon the floors of Cairnhaem,' we told her. '*This wait too long. This weight too heavy*. But we carry the flame, Mother Maryn. Master Wulfric's teachings live on in me.' I hung our head, grief and loss now clawing at our chest. 'We … we *found* her, Mother. The Scion of Heaven. She who would part the veil and save all our damned souls. But I…'

"I closed our eyes then. Guilt and terrible sorrow in my whisper.

"'She fell in battle. Against the Dyvok. I *tried* to s-save her, we tried to…' I moaned, ruined lips peeling back from our teeth. 'Oh sweet and merciful God, *forgive me…'*

"But Maryn's eyes had left me, drifting again to the ceiling high above our heads. And with no more words, she turned away. She moved as if she ached, body stiff from long years of stillness, hobbling between those screaming statues and grime-smeared tombstones, reaching the winding stair leading up to Amath du Miagh'dair.

"Weak and thirsting, we followed, limping in her wake; a small, pale figure swathed in rotten black, rising ever higher on the stair. Wounded, wincing, we staggered after her, finally emerging from the stink of blood and defeat, into the Mothermaid's tomb above.

"The walls were cracked, mosaics of Michon and the other Martyrs bearing the mark of the battles in the city above. But the Mothermaid's tomb was near intact. It was crafted of marble, capped by a great sculpture of silver, tarnished with time. The Mothermaid was wrought at rest upon a bed of skulls, dancing cherubim and mighty seraphim standing guard with silvered swords. And before that tomb, Maryn stood.

"'Mother?' we whispered.

"*'She abides within,'* Maryn said. '*Heaven's Scion.*'

"We nodded, eyes downturned, the bitter taste of failure upon our tongue. 'The funeral rites were spoke three days ago. May Almighty God grant her eternal r—'

"*'Fool.'*

"I glanced up, fear twisting our belly at the wrath in that single word.

"*'Listen.'*

“I obeyed, head tilted, eyes downturned. Outside, I could hear voices—the prisoners who had survived the assault upon Maergenn, the thralls liberated by Dior’s guile. The song of sea and lonely gulls. But then, upon the cracked marble flanks of the Mothermaid’s tomb, I heard it. Faint, but unmistakable. And if the dead heart within our chest had beat, it would surely have flung itself from our ribs in joy.

“Thump. Thump. Thump.

“And then, so faint it might have been an angel calling from heaven’s shore …

“‘Can anyone fucking hear me? ’

“‘Dior,’ we gasped. ‘Sweet God and Mothermaid be praised, she *lives*!’

“I knew not the how of it, nor the why, caring none for neither. With a shapeless cry, we rushed forward, set to free her from that tomb. But the capstone was silver, tons in the weighing—it would burn our hands to cinders before ever we dragged it free. So looking to Mother Maryn, sagging against the wall now, we cried out, wild and shaking with joy.

“‘We will get help!’

“We flew from that tomb, I swear it, borne on wings of a hope such as I had *never* known. I had *seen* her die, Historian. Neck snapped like kindling in the grip of Lilidh Dyvok, her body laid in state for the whole city to grieve. But now, an impossibility, a blessed, incredible *wonder,* the shout spilling from our lips as we rushed through the Hall of Crowns, onto the steps of Dún Maergenn and screaming at the top of our lungs.

“*‘SHE IS RISEN! ’*

“Folk looked to us, wary, frightened—one more monster in a city near destroyed by them. But among the multitude in the rubble and ruin of the dún courtyard, I saw one I yet recognized. Joaquin Marenn. Former houndboy of Aveléne. Dior’s accomplice in the conspiracy that freed the Dyvok’s thralls from bondage, and liberated this city entire. He was stood with a handful of other men, his hound Elaina at his heels.

“‘M. Marenn!’ we roared, dashing toward him.

“‘Mlle Castia,’ he replied, trepidation in his eyes. ‘What tr—’

“‘Dior is risen! The Grail *lives,* do you understand me? She is *risen from the dead!*’

“The boy’s eyes went wide, and folk around us murmured disbelief, signing the wheel at my blasphemy. But we squeezed his arm, eyes boring into his as we spoke.

“‘Bring men! As many men as you can find! And be *swift*!’

“We turned, dashing back toward the dún. Commanding his hound to *stay,* Joaquin rallied a handful of burly messieurs, their hands still scorched by the brands of former thralldom. And urged on by our cries, they followed us through the great halls, down the hidden stone pathways of Niamh Nineswords’ keep. I could hear a clamor growing behind us, word of my revelation spreading through the city. Joaquin ran swift at my side, jaw set, eyes wide—this boy whose life had been saved by Dior's bravery and sacrifice. I could see in him the same which burned in me—a flame of faith, choked by grief to but a single spark, now burning with the promise of that which had seemed utterly lost.

"*Hope.*

"Into Amath du Miagh'dair we ran, Joaquin and the other scorched taking up position around the tomb. One burly fellow started as he noticed Maryn, slumped silent in a corner and watching with eyes dark as sin. But the Mother only smiled, beatific and angelic—a far cry from the horror that had near drunk me to ashes.

"*'Be swift, oh faithful swords. God Himself shall praise thy holy work this day.'*

"Thump. Thump. Thump.

"A pounding within the tomb, the faintest cry.

"'Is someone out there? '

"'Almighty God and Mothermaid,' Joaquin breathed. 'It's *true*.'

"'Lift!' we cried. 'Godssakes, *LIFT*!'

"The beating within the tomb became louder, Dior's cries higher pitched, and we roared, '*WE ARE COMING, CHÉRIE! '* I heard ruckus at the doorway, more folk descending from the courtyard, eyes wide, wondering. And through the crush pushed a familiar figure, clad in leather and furs, a breastplate of embossed iron, her plaited hair burning red, and her eyes the gold of a lioness unleashed.

"'What the bloody hell is goin' on here?' Phoebe á Dúnnsair demanded.

"'She lives!' Joaquin cried. 'Dior is alive, Mlle Phoebe, help us!'

"Phoebe's eyes met ours, brimming with misgiving. But though this woman and I hated each other like powder and flame, whatever passed for a smile twisted our face.

"'She is *risen,* fleshwitch.'

"'Helloooo? '

"'Sweet Mothermoons,' Phoebe whispered.

"The fleshwitch ran to the tomb, but again, she was held at bay by the silver, forced to watch as Joaquin and his fellows bent their backs to the task. Though the scorched had been liberated from servitude by Dior's blood, it seemed some strength of their unholy masters remained, and faces red, straining with the effort, they lifted that great capstone, one fraction after another, every inch a torturous mile.

"Fingers clad in an iron gauntlet emerged from between tomb's cusp and capstone's lip, and despite the threat of silver, we took hold and squeezed.

"*'Help! '* came her cry. 'I'm in here, *I'm here*!"

"'We hear you, chérie! We are coming!'

"Whispers of wonder rippled among the onlookers, spreading like flame on old summer brush. And those murmurs became gasps became cries of joy as those silvered angels were at last thrown aside, and from the cold stone cradle whereupon she'd been laid, the Holy Grail of San Michon burst with a sob of relief.

"*'DIOR!'*

"She crashed into our arms, gasping, weeping, ashen hair plastered to tear-struck cheeks. She still wore the suit of platemail they'd laid her in, the metal groaning now as I crushed her to our chest and wailed at the wonder of it all. With a howl, Phoebe flung herself at us, arms wrapped around the girl, pressing her lips to Dior's cheeks and eyes as tears streamed down her face. The scorched looked on in beggared wonder, Joaquin falling to his knees and calling praises to heaven most high, that from the cold arms of Death himself had salvation been delivered.

"Dior was weeping, bewildered, searching our face and Phoebe's as if we might offer explanation of how this could be. She was warm, breathing, her neck whole and her body seemingly unharmed. But in the lack of answers, we focused on elation, to see this girl we cared for, we needed so *desperately,* somehow returned to life."

The Last Liathe stared at the ceiling above her head, her voice soft with wonder.

"And in that moment, seigneur, I came to believe in miracles.

"'Are ye aright?' Phoebe whispered. 'Are ye…'

"The fleshwitch looked down then, to Dior's hands in hers. Her right was clad in a steel gauntlet, embossed with filigree of gold. But Dior's other hand had been left bare, the wounds she'd earned in that terrible final battle unveiled for all to see. All but her forefinger and thumb were gone—torn away as she'd saved the life of Reyne á Maergenn from dread Lilidh. The wound had been bloody and ragged when she was laid to rest. But now, though the digits themselves were still missing, the skin was smooth, the hurt entirely healed.

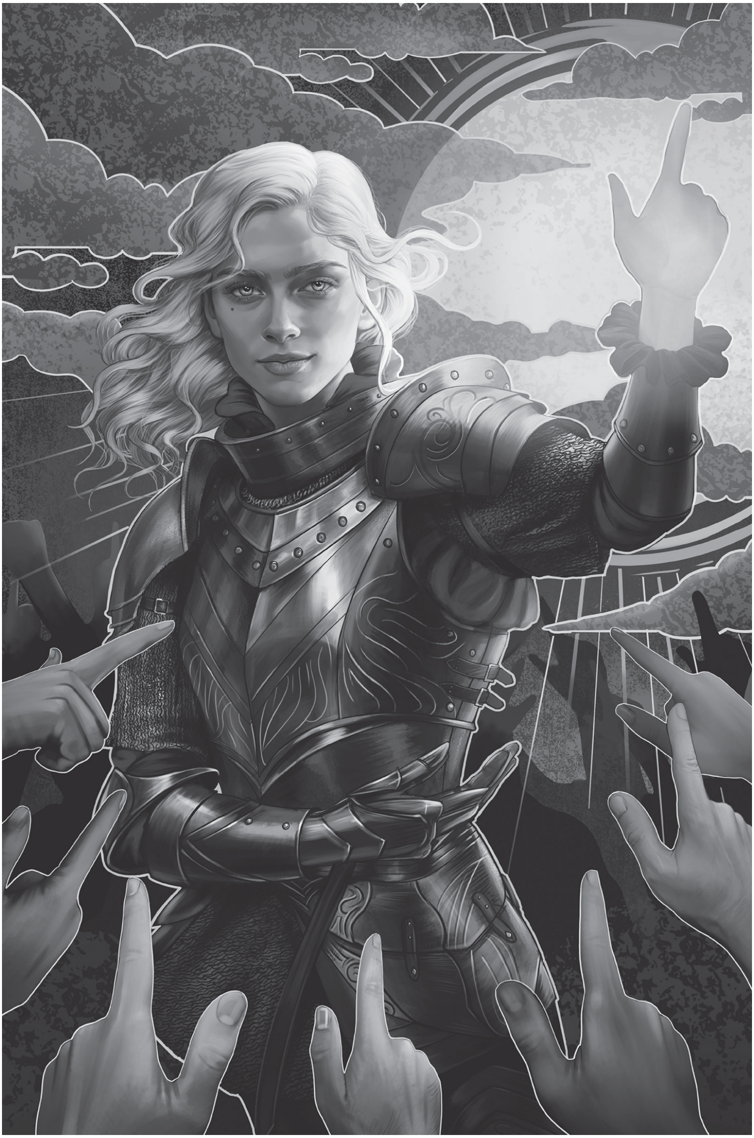
"'What the hell is going on?' the Grail whispered.

"'Dior?'

"The word was frail as glass, edged with tears. And as she looked up, I saw the pale blue of the Grail's eyes catch alight. All wonder, all fear, all doubt vanished at the sight of the girl now stumbling through the crush at the tomb's entrance, her hair the color of summer fire, mismatched eyes alight with wonder.

"'Reyne…' Dior whispered.

"*'DIOR!'*



“The Grail scrambled to her feet, clumsy in her platemail. With a cry, the Princess á Maergenn, youngest daughter of Niamh Nineswords, crashed into her arms, and crushed her lips to Dior’s. Their mouths open, their bodies entwined, their two become perfectly one. There was *joy* in that kiss, sinner, blissful and complete, so bright it might have outshone the sun before the death of days.

“‘Praise be to God,’ we whispered, bloody tears on our cheeks.

“They carried the Grail from that tomb like a conquering queen, Joaquin and the other scorched lifting her high as word of her resurrection spread. Out through the keep they carried her, Phoebe and Reyne in tow, tears in every eye. We followed also, such bewilderment and elation in us we were struck dumb.

"The city was in uproar, folk descending from the gore-flecked alleys of Newtunn, the ash-stained piers of Portunn, the shattered streets of Auldtunn, come to see the miracle unveiled. She rode upon their shoulders, clad in gleaming steel, and it seemed for a moment the skies above grew bright. Faint light shone upon her, like heaven's kiss to her brow, and as the Grail smiled, Joaquin bellowed for all the world to hear.

"'She is risen! God and Mothermaid be praised, SHE IS *RISEN*!'

"They roared, those folk there gathered, voices borne up on the wings of a miracle. They called her name, they begged her blessing, they wept with the awe of those who witness God's work upon this earth. Laughing with joy, Dior lifted her mangled hand. And our dead heart filled with wonder as we saw the crowd do likesame; holding their hands aloft, forefingers and thumbs outstretched in mirror of her own wounds.

"'The Red Hand of God!' Joaquin cried.

"'LA DEMOISELLE DU GRAAL!'

"We stood upon the steps, simply watching; a sight I will never forget. I could find no words, reduced to a heartsick sigh and a glance to storm-struck skies above. It shames me to say it, but I confess I'd wavered. Thought us abandoned by heaven's king. And as we placed one hand over my faithless heart, I vowed I would never doubt him again.

"'Merci, saint-père. Merci.'

"'From holy cup.'

"The whisper carried, even in that uproar, cold fingers down our spine. Phoebe turned, looking now to the shadow at our backs. Maryn there stood, mouth curled in a smile still smeared with our blood. And as she stared at the Grail, she spoke the words carved in the tomb below; the prophecy that would save us, the vow that would deliver us all.

"*'From holy cup comes holy light.*
"*'The faithful hand sets world aright.*
"*'And in the Seven Martyrs' sight,*
"*'Mere man shall end this endless night.*
"*'Before the Five, come unto one,*
"*'With sainted blade, 'neath virgin sun,*
"*'By sacred blood, or else by none.*'

"We signed the wheel, our voice now joining hers.

"Promise.

"Purpose.

"Penance.

"*'This blackened veil shall be undone.*'"

II

TO THE DAWN

"HOW GREAT A change but a handful of sunsets can bring.

"The council was held in the Hall of Plenty, in the heart of the Maergenn château. Only a few days back, this place was filled to brimming with fiends of the Blackheart's court, thralls they had enslaved, folk they saw only as meals. Yet in that bloodstained hall, no devils now held council, but holy warriors and heathen sorcerers and believers true, united by their love of the fierce and beautiful girl stood at the heart of them.

"Fire burned in the hearth—the first that had been lit in that keep since the Dyvok seized it. A gathering of mortals stood about it, trying to banish winter's chill from their bones. Reyne á Maergenn, fifthborn of Niamh Nineswords—no longer in maidservant's garb, but a gown of emerald green embroidered with the wolves and swords of her royal house. Phoebe á Dúnnsair, clad in a breastplate of steel and bloodstained leathers, gold entwined in her slayerbraids and glinting in her predator's eyes. She stood with a passel of her kin; her cousin Breandan, her aunt Cinna, and brutes more animal than man. The hulking bear-kin Brynne á Killaech stood at Phoebe's right hand, and a collection of Highland chieftains loomed at the fleshwitch's back, all sharp teeth and wicked talons.

"Young Joaquin Marenn was in attendance also, along with a bevy of burly men—former thralls of the Dyvok, all. They stood around Dior, armed with burning torches and silversteel taken from sons of San Michon fallen in the battle, the image of a chalice rough-drawn upon their tunics or tabards.

"Dior stood in the midst of them, fine and fey, still clad in mail and a breastplate of steel, a mantle of wolf fur about her shoulders. I knew not the shape of the magik that had bid her rise from her grave, but rather than weakened by her ordeal, she appeared *animated* by it; her eyes keen and movements swift, voice ringing with a newfound power as she gave voice to the question on every mind.

"'How the *hell* can this be?'

"She looked around the room, but none could offer answer. The Grail had been slain—we'd seen it with our own two eyes. Yet now this girl moved and breathed for all to see, cheeks flushed, heart pounding, fairly *brimming* with light and life. And in absence of any rational explanation, we offered the only one we had.

"'A miracle, chérie.'

"Joaquin nodded at our whisper, the men about him likesame, placing forefinger and thumb over their hearts and looking upon her with simple awe.

"'The Red Hand of God.'

"The Grail chewed her lip, the street-smart, cobble-hard urchin in her still discontent with so simple an explanation. But raised on hard stone with hard choices as she was, Dior Lachance was ever a pragmatist. And with no better answer forthcoming, she set the question aside, asking the next most important on her mind.

"'Where's Gabriel?'

"Phoebe lowered her eyes, tucking a braid behind one pointed ear. 'He rode out days ago. Aaron and Baptiste are gone, too. And Gabe's battlebrother Lachlan.'

"'We have to go get him.'

"'We know not where he rides, Flower.'

"Ice-blue eyes met animal gold. 'Your folk can track him, surely. He thinks I'm dead, Phoebe. He thinks it was *his* fault.'

"'It *was* his fault,' Reyne said, faeling eyes now falling on me. 'His *and* yours. You two were so busy trying to murder each other, you let Lilidh murder Dior.'

"'And my Connor besides,' Phoebe growled.

"We were stood against a tree-tall pillar, far from the dreadful heat in that hearth, those believers and their torches. We'd raided the keep's wardrobes, unearthing finer cloth than the rags we'd wrapped ourselves in after we were burned at Cairnhaem. A long frockcoat, white velvet and gold filigree, buttons agleam. Breeches of black leather, riding boots of the same, and for the last, a shirt and scarf of red silk to hide the ruins of our face.

"'Our condolences for the loss of your husband, fleshwitch, but w—'

"'I need nae condolences, leech. I need *nothin*' from ye.'

"'What in the names of Malath and Mothermoons is that *thing* doin' here, anyway?’

“It was a duskdancer who spoke—a chieftain by name of Angiss, so twisted by the Moonsthrone’s idolatrous magiks his head was that of a wolf, and his hands wicked claws.

“‘Aye,’ Brynne growled. ‘We need nae counsel from maebh’lair.’

“‘From whom then,’ we asked, ‘shall you seek it?’

“Phoebe turned to the Grail. ‘We should head to the Highlands, Flower.’

“Murmurs of agreement rippled among the other heathens, drowning out our scoff. But the Grail seemed unconvinced, looking Phoebe over with jaw set.

“‘What’s in the Highlands?’

“‘The All Mothers. Wisdom and magiks, old and true.’

“Phoebe’s aunt Cinna nodded. Her skin was leathered, sacred tattoos faded by time, but her eyes held wisdom. ‘Long have our auguries spoke of the Anabh’Dhai’s birth, lass. Foretelling the birth of the Godling who shall end the Time of Blighted Blood.’

“‘Unless I’m mistaken those auguries said I’d be born of the Highlands,’ Dior replied. ‘Not some streetwalker from Lashaame. And I mean no offense, Cinna. Phoebe. All of you.’ She looked about the Highlanders, hands clasped. ‘I know what you sacrificed to come to my aid, I *truly* do. But I’m not sure what hiding in the Moonsthrone will accomplish.’

“Phoebe gently touched Dior’s cheek. ‘Ye’ll be safe there, Flower.’

“‘Maybe. I’m just not sure *safe* is where I’m supposed to be.’

“The Princess Reyne took her hand. ‘So long as you’re with me.’

“Dior smiled, squeezing the taller girl’s fingers. In the silence following, Joaquin declared, ‘We stand with you, Mlle Dior. Where you lead, we Unbound shall follow.’

“Angiss raised one scarred eyebrow. ‘Unbound?’

“Joaquin nodded. ‘So we call ourselves. Scorched and slaved to the Dyvok no more, but freed by her holy blood, and sworn to her holy cause.’

“‘And where would ye have her lead ye, boy?’

“Joaquin stood taller, squaring his shoulders. ‘Don’t call me boy, monsieur.’

“The wolf-chief scoffed. ‘One battle ’neath yer belt, and ye’d have me name ye *man*? I’ll bet ye’ve barely a whisker on yer bollocks!’

“‘Peace, Angiss,’ Phoebe warned. ‘These goodly folk aren’t the enemy.’

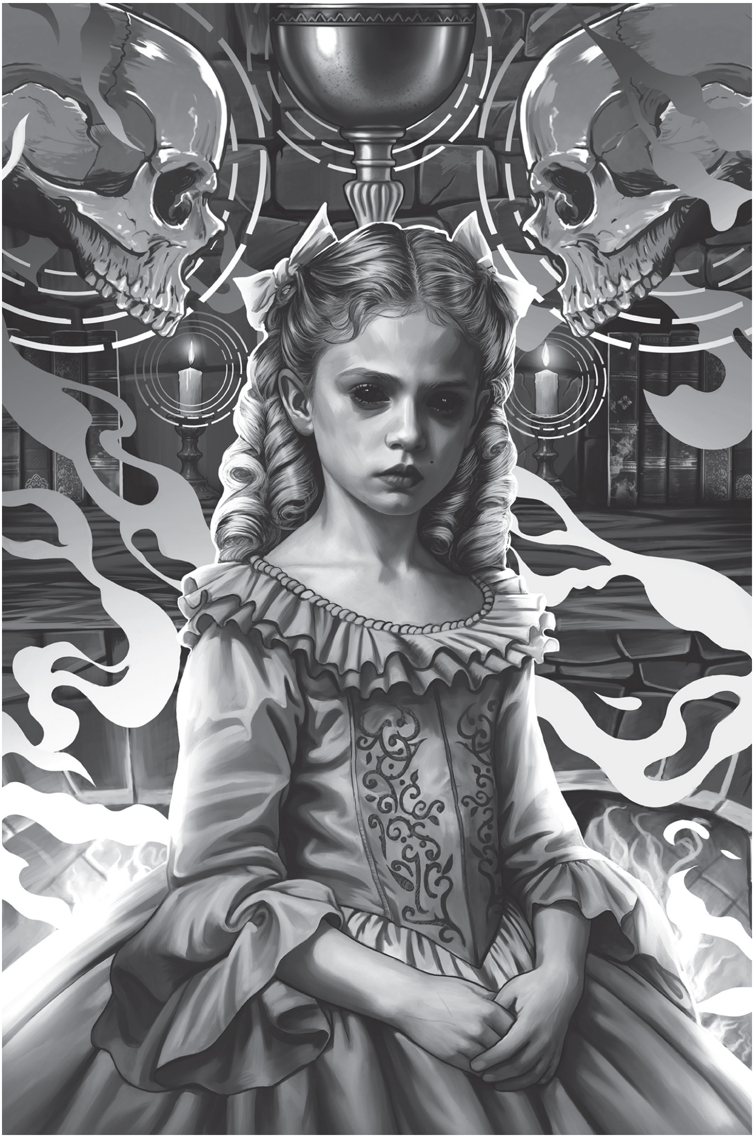
“‘Nae, but enemies stand among us.’ Angiss gestured at us with those terrible claws. ‘The streets outside are drenched with Highlander blood, and yet we count the Dead among our counselors?’

“‘What then would *you* counsel?’ we demanded. ‘Dior Lachance is the Holy Grail of San Michon. Descendent of the Redeemer Himself. It is through the Esana prophecy that she shall lead this world to salvation, and our souls besides.’

"'I've heard such talk before,' Phoebe growled. 'When ye led us to the tomb that was Cairnhaem, and betrayed yer own brother almost to his death. If Gabriel were here—'

"'He is *NOT* here!' I cried, fists clenched. 'Just as he was not there when I was damned to night eternal! Have you not yet noticed that about my dear brother, fleshwitch? Gabriel de León is *never* there when you need him!'

"Dior met our eyes then, pity swimming in pale blue. 'That's not fair, Celene.'



"'*Fair?* Since when does fair have anyth—'

"*'This blackened veil shall be undone.'*

"All the room fell still as those words slit the air. A warm shiver ran down every spine, and the voices in my mind whispered in response. Before she'd spoken, Mother Maryn had stood so small and silent in the shadows that she seemed to slip from the mind somehow. But now, the power of her fairly thrummed upon the walls.

"She was clad in the only clothes we'd found that fit—those of a child. A nobleborn child, to be sure, her velvet gown the color of cream, bodice embroidered with gold thread that matched the curls spilling down her back. She was the very image of innocence—a tiny angel fallen to earth, the kind that might be found hung in the imperial galleries at Augustin, or in a locket about a proud mother's neck. It was only her eyes that gave her away. Her eyes and skin. For while the latter was pale and smooth as alabaster, the former were black, hard, flooded to her lashes with a darkness so deep it might swallow the soul.

"Or so it had seemed to me, at least. We'd sat together, up in the boudoir where we found her attire, and she had fixed me with that bottomless gaze. I'd no notion of the full counting of her years, but I knew she was broodchild of Illia—founder of our faith—and the eldest Esana on earth. Somewhere in her centuries, Maryn must have consumed a child of Voss, for as she stared, I felt her mind touch my own. And though I'd been powerful enough to devour one of the eldest Ironhearts under heaven—dread Aléne, child of Fabién—Maryn's thoughts still pierced mine like a bloody spear."

The Last Liathe paused, fingers steepled at her lips.

"You are of Chastain blood, Marquis. This bloodgift is not yours to know. But the reading of minds can be a … delicate matter. Like … pressing one's fingers to a rime of fresh ice over still water. If you touch but lightly, you can gain a sense of temperature, of texture, without leaving a mark. But press too hard, the ice will crack. Touch too long, it will melt. And though deeper secrets and thoughts can be plumbed beneath that cold surface, the mind's owner will *feel* you there. And few take kindly to such violation."

Celene chuckled.

"Still, Maryn seemed not to care for my feelings that day. She'd been nothing close to gentle, rummaging through the memories and moments that had brought us to this, tracing a path back through time; Dior's imprisonment, the battle at Cairnhaem, our discovery of Jènoah's ashes. I'd felt sorrow trembling the thread between our minds then, but farther back she plunged; watching me save Gabriel's life at San Michon, our battle with Danton on the Mère, all the way back to our childhood in Lorson and the calamity that started this all, dragging ma famille and the realm beside us down this road to hell.

"*'The death of days.'*

"She'd whispered those words, withdrawing from my mind and staring with those fathomless eyes. The voices in me were in tumult, mine brimming with fervor as we spoke.

"'The darkness spoken of in the prophecy, Mother. The blackened veil *she* shall part.'

"*'… Thou hast told her this? A believer, thou hast made her? '*

"'We have, Mother. We need only for *you* to show her the way.'

"Maryn had gazed out the window then, the sunlight long-dimmed by the pall across the heavens. Though she appeared terribly wearied by her long sleep, her mind seemed yet undimmed. She'd stared at that sky for what seemed an age, alabaster brow marred by a crease so tiny it was barely a frown at all. And then Maryn, Mother of Monsters, Priori of Esana and leader of the Faithful, had looked right through me.

"And she had *smiled.*

"She smiled now also, black eyes roaming each man and woman there gathered in that Hall of Plenty. Lightly skimming the surface of their thoughts, I could feel the fear and rage in each, softening as Maryn's gaze fell upon them. Though their minds told them it was a monster they looked upon, their eyes betrayed them; seeing a perfect blond beauty with her doll's curls and delicate hands clasped before her as she stepped toward Dior.

"Only the Grail seemed unmoved by Maryn's power. And yet her eyes still softened as that porcelain doll sank to her knees, and in front of the wondering gaze of those there gathered, kissed each of the Grail's feet in turn.

"'What are you doing?' Dior whispered.

"*'Never,'* Maryn replied, eyes filled with wonder. '*Though eternity's road hath stretched before us since nights afore empire,* never *did we think to actually look upon thee. O merciful God, that we might live to see this night. O glorious Father, that we might yet do thy will upon this earth.'*

"Maryn blinked, bloody tears trickling down her cheeks as she breathed.

"*'San Dior.'*

"Pity washed over the Grail's face, and she murmured, 'Please, don't cry.' And as she reached down to Maryn, that child who was not a child flung her tiny arms about Dior's legs, embracing her so tight the girl gasped. Joaquin and his faithful soldiers tensed, flames crackling in balled fists, and Maryn seemed to remember herself, pushing away, bloody tears now smeared on the Grail's breeches, her own plump cheeks.

"*'Forgive us. But we have waited so very long. Suffered so very much. And to look upon thee now makes every drop of blood worth the spilling.'* Maryn reached out again, touching the tips of Dior's fingers. '*Thou shalt save us, child. Thou shalt save us* all.'

"The Grail looked around the room, gaze lingering on ours. All in that hall were frozen now, a stillness seeming to come over the flames themselves as

Dior lowered herself to one knee so she might look Maryn in her bottomless eyes. And she spoke then; the question that had eluded us through all our years of blood and belief.

“‘How?’

“‘*From holy cup comes holy light.*’

“‘I know the words, Maryn. But what do they mean? What must I *do*?’

“‘*Thou art descendant of the Redeemer, child. The blood of God’s own son flows in thy veins. Ye must fulfill the promise he made, Dior. Claim the crown he was* born *to wear.*’

“I stood enraptured as Maryn searched Dior’s face. I was afire at all this—the answers long denied in Wulfric’s service finally unveiled. But Dior only frowned.

“‘I don’t understand…’

“‘*What know thee of those days faithless men do name the Aavsenct Heresy?* ’

“‘A little.’ Dior shrugged. ‘It was a rebellion, four hundred years back. Mortal descendants of the Redeemer’s daughter raised insurrection against the Augustin Empire. Illia and her Esana backed the rebels. Voss and his Knights of the Blood backed the Emperor. And in the end, my ancestors were murdered near to a man and Illia was destroyed, most of her brood beside her. Only four of you survived.’

“‘*Four.*’ Maryn nodded, tears welling once more in her lashes. ‘*Four of hundreds. So much knowledge. So much beauty. So many souls. All consigned to the abyss when Fabién and his fools sacked our home. Charbourg was the city where the Redeemer was murdered upon his wheel, knew ye that? The shrine where his tomb was built, and where his descendants raised their capital. All now dust and ruins.*’

“Maryn’s little hands balled into fists, black gaze swimming with hatred. But fatigue overcame her, rage dimming as she swayed at the effort. Maryn closed her eyes to steady herself, and when she spoke again, calm had returned to that angel’s voice.

“‘*But in one respect, thou art mistaken, holy child. Thy ancestors raised no* rebellion *against House Augustin. They sought only that which thy blessed forebear, the Redeemer Himself, fought so fierce to claim.*’

“Maryn breathed deep, little fingers now entwined.

“‘*The Redeemer was many things. Leader. Prophet. But more and most, he was a* conqueror. *Spreading his Father’s word at the edge of a righteous blade. He was murdered in Charbourg before his dream of unifying this realm came to fruition. House Augustin and their Church forged an empire in his* name, *but for their* own *glory. In rising against them, your ancestors did only as was their holy right. The bloodline of heaven’s king, seeking to rule the kingdoms of this earth as* he *did, and thus, unite heaven and earth as one.*’

“Reaching out slow, Maryn touched Dior’s hand with trembling fingertips.

“‘*And so* thou *must, holy child.*’

“Dior frowned, rising to her feet. In that moment, I was put in mind of the statues of the Almighty and his Son we had seen outside Cairnhaem—the Redeemer’s visage fierce and fearless, sword in hand, his helm encircled with a crown.

“‘No more riddles,’ Dior hissed. ‘No more fuckery, no more *bullshit*. Talk straightwise with me, Maryn. *Before the Five, come unto one*. What the hell does it mean?’

“*‘The five countries of this realm. United.’*

“‘With sainted blade?’

“*‘The sword carried by the Redeemer in his holy war. The symbol of his power.’*

“‘’ Neath virgin sun?’

“*‘The Feastday of the Maid, his holy mother, when all emperors since the Fivefold Throne was forged have been crowned.’*

“Dior dragged a hand through her pale mop of hair and whispered.

“‘By sacred blood or else by none…’

“*‘Thy blood. The blood of God’s own son. It shall bring the light of heaven to every mother, every babe, every soul who suffers this awful darkness. Ye must end what thy holy forebear began, Dior. On the day of Maidsfeast, ye must be crowned ’pon the Fivefold Throne of Elidaen, bearing the blade thy ancestor sought to seize it with. Finally uniting the rule of heaven and earth. Then, and* only *then…’*

“Dior looked heavenward, toward the black pall above.

“‘This blackened veil shall be undone…’

“*‘So it was prophesied. And so shall it be. Maidsfeast falls ten months from now. By the dawn of that holy day, sweet child, we must be in Augustin.’*

“Dior chewed her lip, murmuring as she gazed into the fire.

“‘How did daysdeath start, Maryn? What *began* all this?’

“*‘We know not, child. When darkness swallowed heaven, in eventide we yet slumbered. But in truth, this saga began a millennia ago. All this hath been foretold. And though know we not how it began, we know how it shall* end.’

“‘Madness.’

“The scoff came from Angiss, glowering now at Maryn. But the child who was not a child turned toward him, and though that warrior of the Moonsthrone dwarfed her in stature, as her tired eyes fell upon him, that great chieftain quailed.

“*‘Turn thy wolf’s ear to us now, Angiss á Barenn, and hear true*. *For eight hundred and seventy-six years hath we walked this earth with faithful feet. When birthed was this body, the tow’ring pines of Ma’dair Craeth were but acorns, and the mighty tribes of the Moonsthrone mere babes, trembling in the weald. We hath seen kingdoms rise, and armies fall, and the dream that could unite heaven and earth slain upon the wheel for the sake of fear and hubris and evil true. We hath seen the face of madness. This be not it.’*

“Maryn took in her little body with a sweep of her hand.

“‘*This be* belief.’

“‘Belief’s all well and good, maebh’lair,’ Phoebe replied. ‘And say fer a moment all ye claim is true. I’m nae seer, but I foresee a few troubles with yer wee prophecy.’

“Maryn blinked. ‘*Aye?* ’

“‘For one, there’s aready an arse sat on the Fivefold Throne of Elidaen. Alexandre de Augustin III. Direct descendant of them who extinguished Dior’s kin under charge of heresy. Fifty years he’s ruled this empire, and he’s nae goin’ to just give his seat up on yer say-so.’

“‘*Truth ye speak, Fiáin dahtr. It may be the Augustins shall resist Dior with the same fervor they resisted at Charbourg. But if offered a chance to end this eternal night, perhaps the Emperor may bend to God’s will. Either way, our case* must *be put to him* soon. *Tale from sweet Celene hath we, that Fabién Voss marches ’pon Augustin’s capital. Should he claim the Fivefold Throne before the Grail, all hope of redemption is lost.*’

“‘… But the sword,’ Reyne murmured.

“‘Aye,’ Phoebe growled. ‘This *sainted blade* Dior must bear when she sits the Lowlander throne. Presuming it’s nae rusted to ruin by now, we’ve nae idea where it is?’

“‘*We do.*’

“Maryn met each stare, her own dark as midnight.

“‘*The Esana have long prepared for this blessed day. Discovered was the Redeemer’s Blade, centuries back. From of the wreckage of the Charbourg was it borne by Faithful hands, spirited to a place of sanctuary. And in that cradle, it abides still.*’

“‘Where?’ Dior demanded.

“‘*Augustin.*’ *Neath the great capital’s skin, in a vault much like the one we slumbered in, doth the last of the four Faithful abide in eventide.*’

“‘Oleander the Wise,’ we whispered.

“‘*Aye,*’ Maryn nodded. ‘*The blade’s keeping hath been Oleander’s sacred charge since Illia’s fall. To his side must we be taken, to rouse him from dreamless sleep with our blood. And with sainted sword in hand, ’pon the Maid’s day of feast, San Michon’s Grail must ascend the throne she was born to sit.*’

“Maryn’s gaze roamed each in turn, her voice brimming with fire.

“‘*And* all *of us shall know salvation.*’

“‘I’m a whorechild,’ Dior whispered. ‘I slept in gutters. I ran with thieves. How the bleeding fuck am I supposed to claim the Fivefold Throne of Elidaen?’

“‘With me beside you.’

“Reyne squeezed Dior’s wounded hand, eyes of emerald and sapphire shining.

“‘You liberated my country. Avenged my family. No matter where you came from, or who you were born of, I see the queen in you, Dior Lachance.

And I shall serve her ’til my final breath slips my lips, and my last drop of blood flees my breast.’

“The Princess sank to one knee, raising forefinger and thumb over her heart.

“‘La demoiselle du Graal.’

“Joaquin and his Unbound matched suit, kneeling and placing forefinger and thumb upon their chests.

“*‘La demoiselle du Graal.’*

“Phoebe looked among her kinfolk, but the heathens seemed unconvinced. Her aunt Cinna pressed her lips thin, and Angiss á Barenn glowered at Maryn, arms folded.

“‘It speaks with velvet tongue. But we came to Maergenn to avenge our stolen blood, nae to heed the words of the Dead. I’d seek counsel in the Moonsthrone afore I marched to the Lowlands, and into a war we have *nae* stake in.’

“‘We *all* have a stake here, Angiss,’ Phoebe hissed. ‘The Time of Blighted Bl—’

“‘The prophecy says the Godling will be born o’ the Moonsthrone, nae some Sūdhaemi whore.’ Angiss looked to Dior, lip curled. ‘She is nae the one, Dúnnsair.’

“Grim agreement rippled about the room, and even faithful Brynne hung her head. Phoebe looked to her aunt, golden eyes pleading. ‘Aunt Cinna…’

“‘Ye must understand, Phoebe,’ the old woman said. ‘This battle’s toll was without measure. I know ye believe in this lass. I see a fire in her too. But we cannae march to Augustin and risk all we have left without consulting w’ the All Mothers first.’

“‘That will take *months,’* Phoebe hissed.

“‘Then months it shall take,’ Angiss growled. ‘I fer one shall weigh the counsel of our wisest and eldest over the word of a corpse.’

“Phoebe looked about the room, but in her kin, she saw only misgiving, mistrust. It was hard to fault their faithlessness, in truth. The death toll wrought upon the Highlanders in the Battle of Maergenn had been terrible. And they *were* godless heathens, after all.

“But still, one daughter of the Moonsthrone held the faith.

“‘Well, *I* shall keep my vow.’

“Phoebe turned to Dior, hunter’s eyes ablaze.

“‘I swore aready. By my heartsblood spilled. I am yer talon and tooth, Flower. If by my blood or boon or breath might ye be kept safe, I shall give all in yer service. And if this be the steerage of yer course, I shall stand it beside ye.’

“With those words, the fleshwitch bent her knee.

“‘La demoiselle du Graal.’

“Maryn also knelt, whispering thanks to God. With the same upon our ragged lips, I genuflected, forefinger and thumb to our breast. Though the Highlanders were unmoved, Dior’s pale blue eyes swept the rest of the folk in that room—the warriors and princesses and ancients of the blood knelt before her. And as she looked upon them, I saw the spark of faith she’d long held in check finally burst into fire. It is a fine gift to have others believe in you, sinner. It is a different boon entire to believe in *yourself*. But there in that room, I saw it unleashed—all the holy promise instilled in this child, now come full to bloom. And for the first time in as long as she could recall, Celene Castia looked forward to the dawn.

“‘Aright.’

“Dior sighed, drawing Reyne up to her feet.

“‘To Augustin.’”

III

OF THESE WOUNDS

“WE WAITED FOR Gabriel as long as we were able.

“A week had passed since the Grail’s resurrection, and Maergenn was a city much changed. We stood upon the dún’s battlements, watching folk rush through her streets like ants, arms laden, wagons loaded. Maryn’s face was serene, black gaze roaming the ocean we must soon cross, sea winds tumbling golden curls about her cheeks. Dior was less a picture of calm; pacing the cracked stones with hands clasped at her back, wide blue eyes drifting ever northward. She wore a blue cloak, a mantle of pale wolf furs, and a breastplate of steel; new embossed with the same sigil now stitched into hundreds of tabards among her honorguard in the streets of Portunn below.

“A chalice, silhouetted against a field of flame.

“‘The tide won’t wait, Dior. And we’ve waited too long aready.’

“It was the Princess á Maergenn speaking, leaning on the ramparts with arms folded, freckled cheeks pinked by biting dawn winds. She’d abandoned her royal gowns for the journey ahead—dressed in leather britches and knee-high boots, a mail hauberk and a tabard of two greens, hatched with black and blue, embroidered with the wolves and nine swords of her clan. A longblade of silversteel taken from a dead son of San Michon hung at her belt, and her auburn hair was bound in a long warbraid.

“‘He’ll come,’ Dior insisted. ‘I know it.’

“Reyne sighed, taking up the younger girl’s hands. ‘He thinks you’re dead, love.’

“‘I don’t care,’ Dior hissed. ‘Gabe won’t leave me. He *promised*.’

“We stood quiet as stone, but the voices in my mind were gabbling, babbling; a cacophony that was hard to contain. Understand they had *always* been there, Marquis—those souls I carried within me, whispering in my dark. But over the last few nights in Maryn’s presence, I’d noted they’d become *far* louder. I could hear each of them now, not just a sea of voices, but individuals, clearer than they had ever been. Truth told, they’d become so loud we’d been relieved when Dior commanded us to leave the dún to hunt for my faithless brother. But …

“‘You found no trace of him?’ she demanded, rounding on me. ‘Nothing at all?’

“‘No, chérie.’

“‘Would you tell me if you had?’

“Black eyes burned in the back of my mind. Maryn yet staring at the sea.

“‘I would tell you. We found no sign of Gabriel, Dior. I vow it on my souls.’

“She scowled at that, arms wrapped about herself as she began pacing the ramparts anew. Bells were ringing in Portunn below, cries echoing amid the shush of the waves, the high calls of heartsick gulls. Reyne glanced to me, lips pressed thin.

“‘Dior, we *must* depart for Augustin. Capitaine á Connell says we need to pass around the Cape of Knives before the spring thaw. The currents will change, the seas—’

“‘Phoebe sent her best trackers on Gabe’s trail. They’ll return with news, I know it.’

“The Princess á Maergenn seemed set to argue, but we heard soft tread upon the stone then. Dior caught it also, turning as Phoebe á Dúnnsair climbed the crumbling stairs to our highwalk. She glared at me, yet spared a small nod for Maryn—Highlanders were a people who cherished the wisdom of matriarchs, remember, and Phoebe had sense enough to concede there were none so venerable in that keep as Maryn herself.

“‘Phoebe,’ Dior breathed. ‘What news, did y—’

“‘Nothin’, Flower.’ The fleshwitch looked norward, her voice heartsick. ‘Long we hunted. Valley, river, and dell. But we found nae sign of Gabriel.’

“‘Well, he can’t have just disappeared!’

“‘Storms have blown fierce these last days, Dior. Old tracks. Fresh snows. Nae novice woodsmen are the Black Lion or his fellows. And my folk are keen to be headin’ home.’

“The Grail sank to her haunches, dragging her mangled hand back through her curls.

“‘Fuck my *face…’*

“Reyne exchanged a glance with the fleshwitch. ‘Dior—’

"'I know what you'd say,' the Grail snapped. 'And it might feel like wisdom. But Gabriel de León has fought beside me longer than *any* of you. He brought down the walls of this whole fucking city to return to my side, and turning my back on him now…'

"She shook her head, looking eastward.

"'It might be wise. But it's just not *right*.'

"'*My father perished of plague when I was a child.*'

"All turned to Maryn, still stood with her face to the ocean. Her shadowed eyes were closed, as if after so long in the dark of that tomb, she still struggled to keep them open. Her voice was that of a little girl, but her words carried weight, undeniable.

"'*Little did I know the man who made me. Yet e'en as I fell into damnation's arms, e'er did I seek figureheads to stand in his stead. Centuries I hunted. For a mentor. An anchor. I thought the hole in my heart might be filled, if I could find the right man to fit it.*'

"Maryn opened her eyes, looking now upon Dior.

"'*One day soon shall ye learn same as we—there be none who might fill that void but the Father* above. *Yet know we, why ye love this man. Not thy blood, but yet thy family.*'

"Dior chewed her lip, eyes shining. 'Oui.'

"Maryn nodded, and lifting her hand, bit her wrist. The scent of ancien blood struck us like a sword to the breast, and within us, that choir of souls sang, none so loud as *he*. The Mother bled a single trembling droplet from the wound, and that drop formed itself into a moth, small and crimson, not falling but flitting up into stormwashed skies above.

"'*We are not yet that which we were, holy child. Weak from long slumber. Heavy with lost years. This mote of us will perish in time, crumbling into ash and eternity. But while it lasts, we shall give what little strength we have to the finding of him, this man ye would have stand in thy father's stead. No rest shall we take 'til he be found, and word of thy resurrection gifted to his wond'ring ears.*'

"Dior drew a trembling breath. 'Merci, Maryn.'

"The Mother smiled faintly. '*No thanks, holy child. Thy tears say more than words. But ye must turn thine eyes to ice now, and affix thy resolve with pins of cold adamant. Voss and his legion draw ever nearer to Augustin. If thou hast not claimed the sainted blade and Elidaen's throne both by Maidsfeast, this world shall dwell in darkness eternal.*'

"It was a sobering thought, stilling everyone upon those battlements. Reyne chewed her lip, her faeling eyes falling upon the Mother.

"'Why does Fabién want Augustin, Maryn? He's waged his war for over a decade now, marching from Talhost, ever eastward. Why is he so hell-bent on the capital?'

"'*Hell-bent is right, daughter of Nine Swords. When one gives up his soul, the trappings of power ephemeral are all that remain. No matter how hollow their* *weighing.*’

“‘Well, why does he want *me*?’ Dior demanded. ‘The Forever King has hunted m—’

“‘*Oh, holy child, name him not so. Voss be no king. He is a dogsbody. A baseborn slave. Know thee not, the master he serves? Like* all *those priests who slew heaven’s son? What covenant think ye they broke? What false god think ye they worshipped?* ’

“Dior only shook her head. In reply, Maryn pointed across the bailey where the ruins of Maergenn’s cathedral rose. The blackened sun was cresting the horizon, smudging the dawndoors with faintest light, and upon them was wrought a tale old as the One Faith itself—winged seraphim of heaven and hell, slaying each other in their eternal war.

“Maryn spoke then, shivering every spine upon those battlements.

“‘*Fabién Voss is a servant of hell. Lickspittle to the Lord of the Pit himself. By command of that black prince was God’s son tormented ’pon his wheel, and at his beck, doth his immortal lackey labor still. We hath no ken why Voss desires thee. Only that he serves an evil so absolute God Himself cast it from his kingdom. He* cannot *be allowed to claim thee. And with these brave and beautiful daughters at thy side, we think he shall not. For seldom in our years hath we laid eyes ’pon so fine and fierce a company as this.*’ That dark gaze roamed the ramparts, filling each breast with fire. ‘*But we can wait no longer for the Black Lion of Lorson. Though it grieves thee, holy child, we must depart for Augustin.*’

“Dior sighed, pawing at her eyes. She looked to her wounded hand, the mangled brand of Lilidh, scarred for all the world to see. So much had she given already, this child of gutters and lies. But as she breathed deep and stood, again I saw the queen in her.

“‘Tell Joaquin and the others. It’s time for us to leave.’

“The Princess bowed. ‘My Lady Grail.’

“And with a small nod to Mother Maryn, toward the port she set her tread.”

The Last Liathe fell silent, staring across the rushing waters at the historian. Jean-François was writing swiftly, turning back every few breaths to finish a portrait of the Mother of Monsters. But as the quiet stretched long, filled only by the rush and babble of that black river between them, the vampire raised his eyes.

“Are you waiting for something, Mlle Castia?”

The Liathe stared, dark gaze agleam with a thousand points of refracted light.

“Some gasp of false breath? Some muttered blasphemy? Some sign you understand the *magnitude* of what we have just revealed to you?”

“And what have you revealed, precisely?”

“Margot Chastain.”

Jean-François stifled a yawn, dipped his quill. “What of her?”

“She is of the *Five,*” Celene hissed. “Spoken of in Testaments, just as Fabién; priestess of gods false and covenants broken. You are many things, Jean-François, but no true servant of the pit do we mark you. We are wondering how it feels to learn your maker is a devotee of the Lord of Hell himself?”

The historian chuckled, turning back to his portrait of Maryn.

“And I am to take your word on this?” The historian pouted, tapping his lip. “Nono, not even *your* word, oui? Instead, I should trust the testimony of a cannibal of her own kind, with over eight hundred years of slaughter drenching her wee cherub’s claws, and God only knows how many stolen souls clambering for attention inside her tiny bonce?”

“Mother Maryn was no angel, to be sure.”

“Nor her maker.” Jean-François scoffed. “Maryn was broodchild of Illia—also one of these Five, oui? If there be a pebble of truth in this avalanche of deceit, then the founder of your entire cult was *also* a bootlicker of the Fallen.”

“Illia repented before she died. Worked to undo her legion of sins.” Celene leaned forward, fixing the historian in her stare. “You can too, Jean-François.”

Jean-François’s fangs gleamed as he threw his head back and guffawed.

“And who shall be my confessor, Mlle Castia? *You?* Shall I have Meline bring down a priest’s dress and holy water for the rites of contrition?” The historian rose from his seat, spitting now. “No, that wouldn’t work, would it? Because for all your petty preaching, and all your counterfeit piety, your beloved Almighty hates *you* as much as he hates *me*.”

Jean-François stilled himself, sitting back down, the reflection in Celene’s eyes showing only an empty chair. Straightening his cravat, the historian lifted his quill again.

“‘Toward the port she set her tread,’” he quoted.

And across that black river, Celene sighed.

“Portunn was aflurry,” she said. “Final preparations for our journey to the capital underway. We walked side by side with Maryn; Dior, Phoebe, and Reyne ahead, the crush of folk parting before the Grail as if the waters before San Antoine. And looking out over the boardwalks to the means of our departure, we were forced to thank the Almighty for his providence.

“Even as Maergenn fell, as silversaint and duskdancer and vampire clashed upon the walls of his dún, Nikita Dyvok fought like a demon. But though all his court feared him, not all of them were loyal. And in those final moments, no few Dyvok abandoned their liege, betraying their blood oaths in exchange for forever.

“Among those rats was the Draigann, broodchild of Lilidh, master of the Dyvok fleet. Two dozen warships had been moored off Portunn, and when Lilidh’s eldest gave the order, those vessels hauled anchor and fled, the

Draigann and his dogs safe aboard. The ships they could not crew, the kith scuttled, sending them to the bottom of the Gulf of Wolves—all save one. A grand three-masted war galley, miraculously left unmarred, unscarred. Anchored a few hundred feet offshore, and now claimed by the Red Hand of God.

"Her figurehead was a beautiful maid in ornate armor, her sword outstretched along the bowsprit. Her sails were daubed with the same sigil marking the doublets and tabards of Dior's faithful—that chalice silhouetted by flame. She had once been called *Marauder,* but the name down her prow had been sanded clean and replaced with another, a promise, a prayer for all that she would soon sail for.

"*Dawnseeker.*

"With soldiers serving as crew, she could hold more than two hundred fighting men aboard. A cadre was being ferried out to her now, calls echoing down the crowded docks. We could see Maryn's great stone coffin riding in the longboat with them, that angel carved upon its lid. We'd be sailing over the ocean of course, and salt water is not the impediment to our kind that fresh water is. But the Mother still needed a place to sleep.

"Phoebe's kin were among those loading supplies for our journey, but the Highlanders would soon be heading back to their mountains. Their march would take months, and now that the Dyvok were defeated, we'd no idea if their All Mothers would allow further entanglement in 'Lowland affairs.' Idolators they might have been, but the talons and fangs of fleshwitches can slay kith swift as silver, and their army would have been a boon in the coming battle. But in all likelihood, they were off the board for good."

The Last Liathe scowled.

"Damned heathens."

"You speak of them so fondly, too." Jean-François dipped his quill and tutted. "I simply *cannot* imagine why they'd forsake the pleasures of your company, Mlle Castia."

Celene rolled her eyes, but ignored the jab.

"We waited for the next longboat, watching a lonely gull circle overhead. Phoebe had gone to speak to her kin, kissing each cheek of the big úrfuil, Brynne á Killaech, and gifting her cousin Breandan and aunt Cinna embraces of farewell. Old Cinna cradled a young blond girl in her arms—we recognized her as Mlle Mila, a lass rescued by Gabriel and Dior at Aveléne, now apparently adopted by the Dúnnsairs. The little girl was watching us with wide eyes, moppet doll clutched to her chest, raising one hand in farewell.

"Beside us, Maryn's eyes were once more closed, her thin shoulders slumped. She'd fed upon a captured foulblood yestereve, draining the wretch to ashes, but the Mother still seemed terribly frail; enervated by that long century in eventide.

"The Grail stood with Reyne, the pair touching every so often as if to reassure the other she was there. We could see the faint smile on Dior's lips every time their fingertips brushed, the blush rising on the Princess's cheeks in kind. And yet, as Dior looked across the bustling docks, the love-bright smile faded from her lips.

"She'd spied a boy, sitting among the rope coils and provisions. He was Ossian born, perhaps seven or eight, muddy of hair and freckled of skin. He was watching the workers, but his leg was bound to a splint with bloodstained rags, his green eyes smudged with pain.

"Letting her fingers drift from Reyne's, Dior wandered over to the lad. His eyes grew wide as she crouched before him, all the motion around her falling still.

"'What's your name, garçon?'

"The boy tried to answer, so overcome he managed only to flap his lips.

"'Yer pardon, Holy Maid.'

"Dior turned to a tall Ossian man standing among the now-motionless dockmen.

"'I'm his da if it please ye. His name is Finley.'

"'Finley.' Smiling, Dior turned back to the lad. 'That's a good name.'

"The boy spoke, soft with awe. 'It means *Fine Warrior.*'

"'I'm sure you're the finest. But it seems you've hurt your leg, Finley.'

"'He broke it, Holy Maid,' the lad's father explained, doffing his cap. 'In the attack, like. When the leeches were throwin' their boulders into the Auldtunn streets.'

"'They got Laini, too,' the boy whispered. 'Their rocks squished her.'

"The Grail touched his hand, soft with sorrow. 'Was she your sister?'

"'My k-kitty.'

"'I'm sorry.' Dior brushed the grubby red hair from his eyes. 'I wish I could give her back. But I can help *you,* Finley. If you'll let me? Can I see your leg?'

"The lad looked to his father, uncertain. But the man said only, 'Courage, boy.'

"And so, meeting the Grail's eyes, little Finley nodded. Smiling, Dior reached out gently, the boy wincing as she unbound his broken leg from its splint. His skin was horribly swollen and blotched—infection already setting in at his roots. Keeping her face stone, Dior reached to her belt, and the boy whimpered as she drew a dagger. Around us, I saw Phoebe tense, Mother Maryn watching, a hush come over the docks now.

"And with the tip of her blade, the Grail pricked the finger of her mangled hand.

"Blood welled bright at her fingertip; a rubied pearl glittering in the dim dawn. The scent was wondrous, *perilous,* as if the curtain of the heavens had been rolled back and the sunlight of my long-stolen youth shone upon my face once more. And with a whisper of comfort, Dior smeared her blood upon that septic skin.

"For a moment, all remained as it was. I saw dockmen murmur among themselves, exchange wary glances. But before our awestruck eyes, we saw the bruises on that child's skin fade then, the unwholesome pallor flush with vigor. And with eyes wide, little Finley slowly stood, testing his weight and looking to his father in wonder.

"'Pa, look, I'm fixed!'

"'Sweet Redeemer…' the man whispered, tears welling in his lashes.

"The whisper echoed down the docks, all the folk around Dior now sinking to their knees. Every eye was alight with the fire of faith, every tongue breathing prayers to the Almighty. Maryn met our gaze, a smile curling her lips as someone in the crowd began singing a hymn to heaven's glory. Others reached out to touch the hem of Dior's cloak as she rose to her feet, sea winds tousling her ashen hair.

"'… Holy Maid?'

"Dior turned, found a woman of middle forty among the throng. Another Ossian, she was—face lined by hardship, clothes greyed by stonedust, arm in a bloody sling.

"'I'd nae dare to presume, b-but…'

"'Of course,' Dior nodded. 'Of *course* I'll help you.'

"The woman whispered thanks, almost in tears as Dior lifted her arm, unwrapped the filthy dressing. The wound was terrible; as like to end in amputation as not. And yet, as before, with a touch of her holy blood, the woman's hurts were made well.

"She cried aloud, holding her arm aloft to heaven and calling witness, praying for God's blessings to be showered on the girl's head. Folk were gathering about Dior now, dirty hands outstretched. They begged her to cure their hurts—not just wounds from the assault, but from life itself, pushing and pulling in want just to be near her.

"The mob grew unruly, and Phoebe looked set to intervene. But the Grail shook her head, motioning to the duskdancer all was well. And, knife gleaming, bloody hand outstretched, Dior Lachance set about unwinding every hurt in that battle-bloodied city. By her holy touch were mangled limbs made whole, shattered bones set, blinded eyes made to see. Miracle after miracle she wrought with her red hand, slicing at finger and palm again and *again*—healing their hurts, no matter how much it hurt her in kind.

"The sun was climbing higher, the crowd not yet diminished, the hour growing so late that in the end we drifted to Maryn's side. Our Priori looked tired, leaning upon one of the boardwalk pylons with lashes dipping upon her cheeks.

"'Are you well, Mother?' we asked.

"The unchild's eyes snapped open, and she blinked once, twice before finally focusing on our face. '*Our eventide was long, child. Waking yet are we.*'

"'Should we not away? The tides will not tarry.'

"'*Time we can spare for this. With every drop spilled, her legend grows. And a legend we shall need, sweet Liathe, if we wish to carve our Grail a place 'pon the Fivefold Throne of Elidaen and part the veil forever.*'

"We nodded, seeing the wisdom in it; the blind fervor now blazing in every man, woman and child on those docks. Maryn brushed a golden curl from her cheek, pawing at her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose.

"'*Thou shalt watch o'er her on our journey ahead, Liathe. Slumber's weight yet lies heavy on our shoulders, and we shall have need to rest a time, afore to strength we are returned. Meanwhile, we shall have thee stand vigil o'er the Grail. Keep her counsel. Guard her well. And speak to us, of any deed or word that might trouble thee.*'

"'Your will be done, Mother.'

"'*Thou dost serve us well, good Liathe. Soon shall all thy blessed labors bear sweetest fruit. Unto the arms of God above shall thee and thy burdens be delivered.*'

"I closed our eyes, the voices in my mind whispering.

"'We would like that. *Very* much.'

"'*Have faith, child. Not long now. We know it.*'

"It took another hour before Dior was done. The mortals of Maergenn were fair bewitched by the end of it, and if the Grail had simply walked across the rolling waves out to *Dawnseeker,* they could not have been more amazed. Phoebe bid final farewell to her kin, kissing little Mila's cheek and asking her aunt Cinna to speak to the All Mothers on Dior's behalf. Joaquin and Dior's other Unbound helped her down into the waiting longboat, Elaina sniffing and licking her bloody hand. Maryn and I stood now at the bow, Reyne at Dior's right, Phoebe finally climbing into the longboat with a distinctly uneasy expression.

"'Are you well, Mlle Phoebe?' Joaquin asked.

"'Dinnae like boats,' the fleshwitch growled.

"'Did a masked schooner murder your papa as a child or—'

"'I cannae swim, ye lily-white Nordish cunt!'

"'Oh.' Joaquin flashed a cheerful smile. 'Well, no trouble. If you fall in, I'll save you.'

"Phoebe sank down to the longboat's belly, the black talons at her fingertips digging deep into the gunwale. 'Lay hand on me, I'll break yer fuckin' arms, boy.'

"'No fear, Phoebe,' Dior said. 'I can't swim, either. We can drown together.'

"'Bollocks to that,' Joaquin scoffed. 'I'll just save you both.'

"Dior smiled weakly, Phoebe now looking at her young charge sidelong.

"'Ye aright, Flower?'

“The Grail nodded, rubbing her brow. ‘Just a little dizzy.’

“‘Nae surprised. Ye must’ve spilled half a gallon o’ claret up there.’

“‘It was worth it.’ Dior looked back to the docks, where little Finley stood with his father, still waving. Smiling, she raised her hand in return.

“*‘San Dior! ’* they cried. ‘*La demoiselle du Graal! ’*

“‘Dior,’ Reyne whispered, eyes gone wide. ‘Sweet Mothermaid…’

“We heard the odd note in the Princess’s voice, whispering in awe. It had always been the nature of her holy gift that Dior could heal the wounds of others, but not herself. Though she might drag a body back from the very brink of death with her blood, her own body was as slow to mend as any mortal’s. She’d sliced her skin open dozens of times as she’d worked, we’d seen it with our own two eyes. But now …

“‘Your hand,’ we whispered.

“Holding her mangled paw up before her, Dior’s eyes grew wide. For while her fingers were still missing, the cuts she’d carved to mend those folk on the docks …

“‘Holy *shit,*’ she breathed.

“The Grail’s wounds had *healed.*”

IV

UPON THE SILVERED GLASS

“AND SO WE sailed on salvation’s wings, with all the hopes of heaven upon our shoulders.

“We ran swift across the Gulf of Wolves, down the west coast of Sūdhaem. Winter currents rolled chill and ever southward, winds filling our sails to the brim. But all knew the turn of spring must come eventually, and every man of the *Dawnseeker*’s crew was bent to see us safe around the Cape of Knives before the seas grew treacherous. Beyond waited the Bay of Antoine, and across those dark waters, the capital of Augustin.

“The sainted blade.

“The end of this blackened veil.

“As she warned, Mother Maryn was still recovering from her spell in eventide, and she kept herself in the cabin set aside for her—an arrangement that suited the mortals aboard *Dawnseeker* all too well. The trust Dior instilled was made of sterner stuff than steel, and the fact that Maryn was in Dior’s counsel was lost on no one. But neither was the truth that the Mother and I were both vampires.”

“What did you drink?”

Celene paused, glancing up at Jean-François. The historian continued writing, flipping back a few pages every now and then to add to his sketch of Mother Maryn.

“Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity? You could not drench your teeth with each other, for fear of thralldom. And unless you'd a stash of hapless wretched tucked up in the hold, there were no others of our kin to cannibalize."

"You use that word often. *Cannibal.*" Celene tilted her head, scowling. "But while the vessel is consumed in communion, the soul of the sinner is saved within the body of the—"

"Spare me the sermon. I inquired what you drank, Mlle Castia. I did not request a potted summary of the depraved practices of your morbid little cult."

Celene leaned forward now, legs crossed beneath her, elbows on her knees.

"You wonder, don't you? What communion is like?"

"If I wonder anything, Mlle Castia, it is how you animals lived with yourselves."

Celene encompassed her body with a wave of one hand. "We have company."

"What you *have* is a problem with grammar. *We. I.* Honestly, sometimes I have no idea if you speak of yourself, the souls within you, or the folk around you."

The Last Liathe rolled up onto her hands and knees now, curtains of black hair dripping about her pale cheeks, prowling toward the river's shore like a lioness.

"We can show you what it is like, Jean-François. We can teach you, if you've a—"

"*Sit.* Back. Down."

The historian threw a meaningful glance to his thralls, chocolat eyes gone wroth as his gaze returned to Celene. The pair matched wills for a moment—fifty years against a mere dozen, shadows deep as centuries roiling beneath. But with a glance to those fearsome flames, Celene sank onto her backside once more.

"We drank blood," she explained. "A mouthful each night, gathered among Dior's faithful at her request. As we said, she'd saved every life aboard that ship—there was *nothing* those folk would not do for their savior. Joaquin delivered it every eve, silversteel in one hand, cup in the other. It was not much, to be sure. But enough."

The Last Liathe looked heavenward and sighed.

"God knew where we were headed, there would be blood in abundance.

"We kept two eyes on Dior at all times. Even when we were not with the Grail personally, we were with her still; the tiny red moth of our blood that had accompanied her in Maergenn, flitting now through the shadows in her wake. We'd no explanation how her wounds had healed, aside from the same miracle that had raised her from the dead. And though we found some relief that God Himself might be taking a direct hand in the Grail's well-being at last, still we watched her close, just as the Mother commanded.

"It was difficult to concentrate on our vigil. As I said, the voices inside my mind were disquiet around our Priori, and there was no escape from Maryn's presence aboard that ship. Though they all clamored inside my skull, there was *one* growling louder than the rest now—a shadow beating upon the battlements of my mind. Yet I was resolved to keep him down in the dark where he belonged, focused as best I could on watching Dior.

"As you might expect, the Grail kept most to the company of Reyne á Maergenn. They did not share a bed—Reyne still slept among the hammocks belowdecks, while Dior had been granted her own cabin out of respect for her station. But the girls ate together, walked together, trained together—the Princess imparting knowledge from her long years as a student of the famed Chante-Lames. The Bladesingers of Montfort.

"They were practicing one day, a fortnight into the journey, the foredeck cleared for their session. We were sat on the bowsprit, eyes to the ocean, watching through our moth hidden in Dior's jacket. Reyne was running Dior through a series of parries, meeting the Grail's strikes with her own. Though the wind was freezing, each girl had stripped down to tunic and britches, sheened with sweat as they danced across the timbers.

"'Lower your guard a touch,' Reyne warned. 'You're holding your blade too high.'

"Dior scowled. 'Last time I held it low, you stabbed me in the baps.'

"'You have to move your sword, you realize.' The Princess smiled, sword cracking Dior's, *one, two, three*. 'Your enemy won't be kind enough to aim for it.'

"'Right in the bloody *baps,* Reyne.'

"'I said I was sorry.'

"'Sorry's all well and good, Princess. But hardly just compensation.'

"'And what compensation would my Lady Grail demand?'

"'Kiss them better, of course.'

"Reyne blinked, cheeks pinking at the request. And in that moment of shock, Dior delivered a low blow learned on the streets of Lashaame; sweeping Reyne's legs out from under her. The Princess crashed onto the timbers, Dior leaping atop her foe. Pinning the Princess's arms with her thighs, the Grail pressed her practice blade to Reyne's throat.

"'Checkmake,' she grinned.

"'It's check*mate,*' the Princess wheezed.

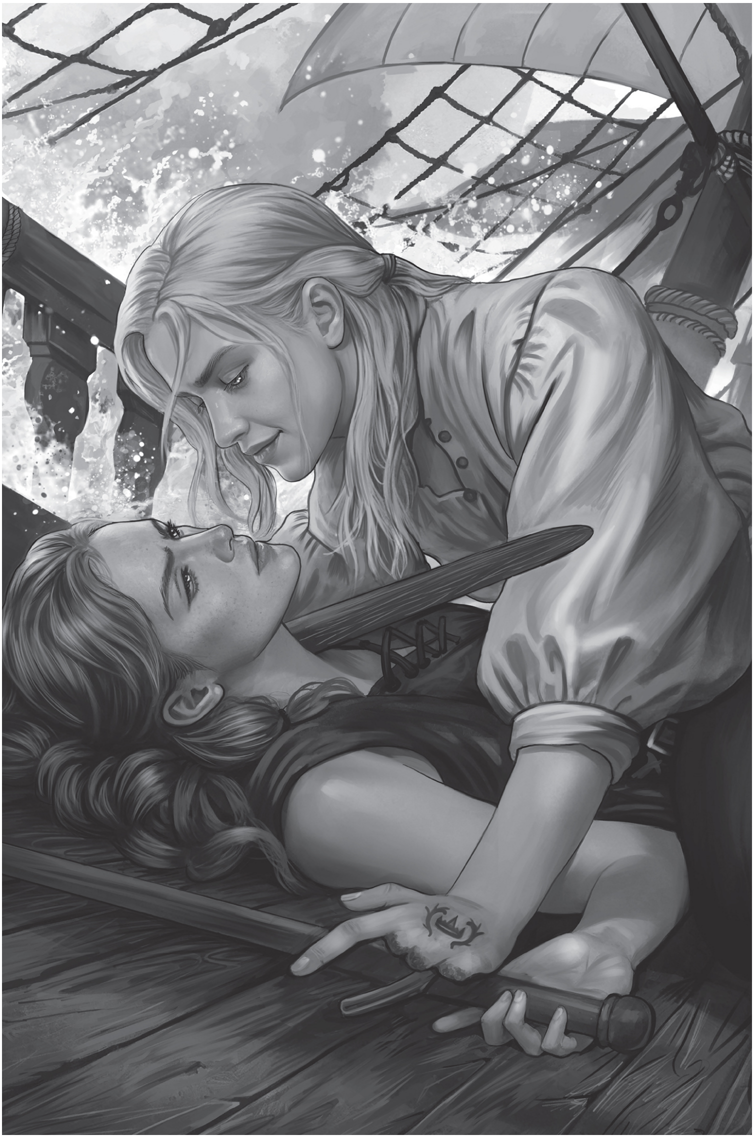
"'As it please. Gabe only gave me one chess lesson, but seems it was a good one.'

"Reyne looked up with mismatched eyes. 'You're not taking this seriously, Dior.'

"Dior leaned closer, breathing in Reyne's sweat. 'I'm taking it *terribly* seriously.'

"Reyne glanced to the crew about them, cheeks flushing deeper. 'Let me up.’

“‘Or what?’



“‘Or I’ll show you gently as I can how much you *really* don’t know about swordplay.’

“Dior drew even closer, lips brushing soft against Reyne’s as she whispered.

“‘I’ll confess it’s not swordplay on my mind right now, Princess á M—’

“‘*Ahem.*’

“Both girls started, looking up to find Phoebe á Dúnnsair looming over them. The wind tousled the fleshwitch’s auburn braids, golden eyes gleaming. The Time of Blighted Blood had not marked her as hideously as some of her kin, but we could not help notice the pointed ears, those wicked claws, the fact her shadow was not a woman’s but a *lion’s*.

“‘Yer pardon fer intrudin’. I can come back if…?’

“‘It’s aright, Phoebe. We’re done sweating.’ Dior winked at Reyne. ‘For now.’

“The fleshwitch glanced to the wooden blades as Dior hauled herself to her feet. ‘Good to keep busy, bottled up on this accursed bucket an’ all. But if I dinnae know better, I’d say ye were preparing fer battle.’

“Dior frowned. ‘We’re *headed* toward battle, Phoebe.’

“‘And ye’ve a shipful of soldiers w’ye to ensure ye won’t have to fight it.’

“‘Gabe sang me this song, too. But I’m not going to sit on the sidelines while others fight my wars for me. If you came down here just to lecture…’

“‘I didn’t. And I dinnae mean to scold.’ Phoebe touched Dior’s hand, golden gaze gone soft. ‘I … I just care fer ye, is all, Flower. And w’ Gabriel gone…’

“Dior’s frown softened, a sad smile on her lips. ‘I know. I love you, too.’

“Phoebe sighed, chewing at her lip.

“‘I came fer a word. One I’ve struggled with these last weeks. But now it weighs so heavy in my chest, I need to spit it afore it chokes me.’

“‘You can tell me.’ The Grail squeezed her hand. ‘You can tell me anything.’

“‘I know. But it’s nae a word fer *ye,* love.’

“The fleshwitch’s gaze fell on the Princess. Reyne blinked in reply.

“‘Me?’

“Phoebe nodded and pursed her lips, suspicious eyes falling now on my back. We remained far out on the bowsprit, ostensibly far from hearing, pretending for all intents and purposes to be oblivious. And so the duskdancer cast her gaze back toward the rushing shoreline, the shadow of the Nineswords’ capital long-faded into the snow-struck distance.

“‘It’s about yer ma, girl.’ Phoebe met Reyne’s gaze, the Princess bristling a little at mention of her dam. ‘I know ye likely grew up on legends of the Nineswords and her mighty deeds. She who united the clans of Ossway and forged their nine blades into one.’

“‘I’ve heard the tales of my mother’s victories,’ Reyne replied. ‘Many times.’

“‘Well, they’re bollocks. Niamh á Maergenn was a *tyrant,* lass. A conqueror and a cunt, who carved her blessed peace at the edge of a bloody sword. After she was done scourging the Lowlands, Niamh turned her marauder’s eye to the High. Yer ma marched her army there, and did vicious war upon my people. Burned the wealds, sacked our clanholds, drenched the snows red w' our blood.'

"'I know my mother was no saint,' Reyne said, chin held high. 'But you're telling me nothing I couldn't read in a history book, Highlander.'

"'Fair play. But what yer history books dinnae tell is that in the thick of those blood-drenched days, the new-widowed Niamh Nineswords met a man. A warrior poet, who convinced her the glory she might win if ever she managed to capture the Moonsthrone would nae be worth the price she'd pay fer victory.'

"'My mother told me of him,' Reyne nodded. 'She said he was my father.'

"'And he told me of her,' Phoebe replied. 'Because he was my husband.'

"Dior and Reyne glanced at each other then, the Grail's lips parted in shock.

"'Holy shit…'

"'This was *long* before we were wed,' Phoebe said. 'My Connor was a wanderer back then. Trekking from Asheve's shores to Augustin itself. A royal vagabond, descendent of Ailidh, seeking to understand the world he hoped one day to rule. But during his journeys through the Highlands, he met yer ma. And fer a time … he loved her.'

"Reyne frowned, struggling to find words. 'I … he … *you…'*

"'I dinnae know he left her wi' child. Nor did he, I'm *sure* of it. He was an honorable man, my Connor. But when Lilidh brought him to Maergenn as her slave, he'd have marked ye fer his kin. He protected ye from the Heartless in those hours afore Maergenn's fall, though it cost him his life. Yer age and the time of his affair with yer ma all fit, lass. Even now, I cannae be sure, but watchin' ye these last weeks…'

"The fleshwitch caressed the Princess's cheek, smiling sadly.

"'Ye've his *eyes,* Reyne. Moons know I spent enough time drownin' in them.'

"We recalled that great white wolf at the Heartless's side; one eye pale blue, the other marked only by a vicious scar. Reyne's hand rose to her own eyes, emerald and sapphire, both grown wide as she looked to Dior.

"'Like father…'

"'Like daughter,' Dior replied.

"Phoebe searched Reyne's gaze, as if seeking the girl's mettle. 'If my suspicion be true, ye'd be a child of Low and Highland royalty twined. Daughter of the Nineswords and a descendant of Ailidh the Bold both. Ye know her story, lass?'

"'She was…' Reyne shook her head, clearly dumbfounded. But Dior slipped an arm about her waist and squeezed, and the Princess found her voice again. 'A warrior queen. She conquered most of Ossway in the name of the Mothermoons.'

"'Stormbringer they called her. And it's foretold she'll one day be reborn.

A ruler who'll bind the Ossway true, Low and High, nae by edge of blade but right of blood. And if yer a child of Niamh á Maergenn and Connor á Lachlainn both…'

"'But I'm not even first in line for my *mother's* throne! My sister Yvaine lives in southern Elidaen. She's a daughter of pureborn wedlock, not some ill-got bastard.'

"'Don't talk like that,' Dior frowned. 'You're a queen if I ever met one, Reyne.'

"'I see courage in ye, Reyne á Maergenn. And if ye are my Connor's girl…' The fleshwitch swallowed then, voice soft with grief. 'The gift calls to a duskdancer child only when their parents are taken into the arms of death. If Connor's blood ye carry, then his power ye might carry, too. And with him now gone … Have ye noticed any change of late? Sharpness of eye or strength of arm?'

"'… Not at all.'

"'Nae aversion to silver?'

"The Princess motioned to the longblade at her belt; pure silversteel, taken from a fallen son of San Michon. Phoebe pursed her lips, studying the girl's features.

"'It cannae be just chance. He *died* to defend ye. And those eyes…' The fleshwitch shook her head. 'Mebbe his gift dinnae pass to ye. But Connor á Lachlainn was my husband, and if ye be a child of his blood, I've obligation to ye now. I lost the daughter he planted in me afore she was born. And I'm nae yer ma, and shall never be. But…'

"The fleshwitch faltered then, casting her hunter's gaze to the decks. The Princess spoke into the silence, her voice raw with sorrow.

"'Niamh Nineswords was a great woman. But no great mother. She sent me from her side when I was a girl, and when I returned years later, she greeted me only with scorn. The Blackheart took her from me when he took her throne. But truth told … I never really had a mother at all.'

"Phoebe lifted her eyes, dragging talons back through her hair.

"'I'd like to know ye, Reyne á Maergenn. If ye'll let me.'

"'I'd like that, Phoebe á Dúnnsair. Very much.'

"The fleshwitch opened her arms, and Reyne stepped into their arc, eyes closed as they embraced. Dior's eyes shone with tears, and as the pair parted, Phoebe reached into her tunic, fetching a leather thong. Like the collar Phoebe herself wore, it was woven into a beautiful pattern of everknots, wound about a small nut.

"'This is the way of our people,' Phoebe said, presenting the necklet. 'To carry a seed into battle, so that something might grow from the soil where we fall. But more, it's to bear hope of a future brighter, and the promise of morrows greener.'

"Reyne smiled as the duskdancer bound the collar about her throat, fingers brushing the tiny promise of life she now carried. 'Merci, Phoebe.'

"The fleshwitch kissed Reyne's brow. 'Moons' blessings, lass.'

"All this we watched from the railing, real eyes yet to the sea. As the trio parted, we remained motionless, but our thoughts were a storm at all this. Phoebe á Dúnnsair was no friend of ours, and if she held sway over the Princess, she held sway over Dior. In nights to come, the Grail's allegiances could not be torn in two directions, nor her heart in twain.

"Only one thing mattered.

"*By sacred blood, or else by none,*

"*This blackened veil must be undone …*

"And so, after time passed, we rolled to our feet and walked down to the deck, cold wind clawing our hair. The fleshwitch was now on the stern speaking with our capitaine—a grizzled old seadog named á Connell, wide as an ocean, deep as a puddle, teeth made entirely of gold. Hunter's eyes followed as we passed, down the spiral stair belowdecks. Timbers were creaking, waves crashing upon the hull as we stopped outside Maryn's door, raising knuckles to knock.

"*'I cannot do this…'*

"The whisper came from within—the Mother's, sharp and bright with pain. At the sound of her voice, the voices within *us* responded; all those stolen lives, all those harbored souls. A choir of fledglings and mediae—Victorine Ilon, Octavia and Dmitri Dyvok, Alexandra and Anastasia and Anna Chastain. Beyond them I could feel Aléne Voss, one of the seven Princes of Forever; all her power, all her hatred, all her rage uncoiling within me. But deeper, beyond even the Terror's fury, I could feel *him.*

"Mentor.

"Master.

"Monster.

"*'Ye* will *do this,'* came the hiss beyond the door. '*Feckless, faithless coward.*'

"It was Maryn's voice again, but a changed timbre, an altered tone. And when she spoke again, again, it seemed her inflection, even her accent shifted, over and over, as if she spoke with not one voice, but *dozens.*

"*'Hold to thy course. Cleave to thy faith. Not long now.'*

"*'Too long, oh heaven help us,* so *long. How in God's name can you* stand *it? '*

"*'Cease thy whining, all of thee! We hath not labored centuries to stumble at this, finale's throat. Remember all Illia taught thee! And what hangs in this balance! '*

"*'I want to go hoooome.'*

"*'And soon we shall. We all of us, my loves, my dears. Into thine arms, O Lord.'*

"A hiss came then, softer than the rest.

"*'She knows. The Liathe.'*

"*'She knows nothing and none. Stopper thy babble at once.'*

“*‘Great Wulfric would have mentored no fools. If sh—*’

“*‘Silence now, all of thee! ’*

“A quiet fell then, our knuckles rising swift to fill the breach. At the sound of our knocking, Maryn called in the cabin beyond.

“*‘Sweet Celene? ’*

“We opened the door, eyes downturned. ‘Forgive my intrusion, Priori.’

“*‘No intrusion, dear Liathe. Enter of thine own will, and be welcome.*’

“We bowed low, stepping inside. The cabin was sparsely appointed, the space dominated by that great stone coffin she’d slept in beneath the cathedral. Maryn was stood before it, like a statue in the cabin’s heart. The deck below us rolled with the motion of the waves, but though we were forced to constantly rebalance, the Mother stood straight as a pillar, motionless save for her skirts and golden curls, as if her feet were nailed into the deck. Her bloodless face was smiling, but we could still see shadows of fatigue carved beneath her eyes, a knife-hard glint upon those flawless black globes.

“*‘Our counsel, sought thee? ’*

“The voices within me murmured and sang—fear of the Mother, fear for ourselves, the unrest of the vengeful dead—and it was only with effort I forced them into silence. Glancing about the cabin, we saw a war chest, a bookshelf, a washbasin and looking glass. Though any mortal might have seen themselves reflected there, the mirror showed only a stone coffin in an empty room. No Maryn. No …

“*‘Celene? ’*

“‘Forgive us, Priori. But you asked us to keep vigil on the Grail.’

“*‘And so? ’*

“‘The fleshwitch is forging an alliance with Princess á Maergenn. Dúnnsair believes Reyne may be the daughter of her late husband, and seeks to strengthen ties between them. If she is in Reyne’s counsel, she shall have greater influence over the Grail.’

“The Mother smiled, weary but gentle. ‘*Fear not the Fiáin dahtr, sweet Liathe.*’

“‘She is dangerous, Mother. She and her kind loathe us w—’

“*‘Thy concern is noted, child. Thy wise counsel received with gratitude. We thank thee for thy careful vigilance … but we are still tired, sweet Celene. Very tired.*’

“Our Priori clasped her fingers before her and smiled, as if to signal the matter was done. I wished to say more, to press home the threat Phoebe might pose, but Maryn simply stared, black and hard, and I confess I was cowed to silence. The *weight* of her in that room pressed down on me like lead, and I was conscious of how much power was distilled in her tiny frame. Though outwardly Maryn was a picture of calm, I recalled those voices arguing as we approached; the same tumult obviously within her mind that I felt within mine.

“*‘Be there more, dear child? ’*

“We glanced up, lips parted to answer. But behind Maryn, we caught movement then; blades of ice slipped into our belly. Where once that looking glass had looked upon an empty room, a figure now stood reflected in it, glowering over Maryn’s shoulder.

“Right at us.

“It had been years since we saw him in the flesh, and yet we saw him every day. A tall figure, alabaster skin and lustrous hair, rippling like bolts of darkest silk. His eyes were black and piercing, his form swathed in cloth as dark as night. A lord of it. A *prince* of it.

“He stared at me, smashing fists against the looking glass as if trapped on the other side; only that thin shield of silver to keep him from our throat. The mirror trembled, and so did *we,* taking one step back.

“*‘… Sweet Celene? ’*

“We blinked, looking to our Priori. Maryn seemed utterly oblivious, unhearing and unseeing, but over her shoulder, that monster yet pressed against the looking glass.

“*‘Be there more? ’* Maryn repeated.

“‘N-no, Mother,’ we whispered. ‘Forgive us again for the intrusion.’

“She inclined her head. ‘*Ye serve us well, sweet Liathe. Go with God, and be of bright heart. Soon, all thy earthly suffering shall be rewarded in the kingdom of heaven.*’

“‘Oui, Mother. G-godmorrow to you.’

“We glanced once more to the mirror.

“The monster we had murdered, staring right back at us.

“And with belly twisting, jaw clenched, we all but fled the room.”

V

THE TROUBLE WITH MAIDS

“OUT INTO THE hallway and up the narrow stairs we ran, shoving past a terrified boatswain in our haste to escape. If our heart had still beat, it would have flung itself through our rib cage in fear. Stumbling to *Dawnseeker*’s railing, fingernails digging into splintering timber, we hissed his name at the rolling waves.

“‘*Wulfric.*’

“My teacher. Gabriel’s father. Tutor and tyrant, in equal measure. God, I could still remember the night I first met him. Our years in San Yves, the wonder and terror he’d instilled, filling us yet and ever to brimming.

“I could feel him now, rising slow through the ocean of voices within me. And to fend him off, I closed our eyes and clasped our hands and whispered, desperate—the first prayer great Illia gave her followers. The first prayer Wulfric ever taught us.

“‘O Lord of Love, O God of Blood,
“‘O King of Wolf and Lamb,
“‘Thy will be done,
“‘Thy judgment comes,
“‘Alike to bless’d and damned.
“‘Though Dead, by thy word I yet live,
“‘Though cursed, by thy will I now rise,
“‘Bonds earthly I sever, thy servant forever.

"'And evil I do, lest evil I be,
"'No more than the monster ye made me.'

"I opened our eyes. And though the choir of souls within me still whispered, relief came as we realized Wulfric had receded, sinking back below our surface.

"We dragged one hand through our hair, letting the ocean sigh upon our skin. I'd not felt like this before. The pieces of the souls I'd saved had always been a part of me, but their voices had never been so loud, nor their faces so clear, and I wondered at the why of it. We knew from the argument we'd just overheard in Maryn's cabin that our Priori was also feeling this discord, and we might've asked her about it. But to draw attention to the souls within me was to risk my Priori discovering Wulfric was among them. Her brother in blood. One of only four Esana to escape the massacre at Charbourg. And though I'd no clue what punishment she'd mete for my crime, the memory of her fangs in my throat …

"Truth was Maryn terrified me, Marquis."

The Last Liathe shook her head, eyes downturned.

"And so, I determined to deal with this as I'd dealt with every obstacle life had thrown my way. Alone. So turning my mind from those shadows, those whispers roiling within me, I set thought once more to my vigil on Dior. Looking about the decks, I could see no sign of her, or Reyne. But as I said, my eyes were not the only eyes I had on *Dawnseeker*. And turning my thoughts inward, I focused on the tiny moth of our blood.

"It had secreted itself inside the Grail's jacket as she'd departed. We sensed it belowdecks now; shrouded in darkness and muffled sound. Closing our eyes, we slipped inside it, willing it into motion with the stolen power in our veins.

"We fluttered our wings. Stretched our legs. Crawling from crumpled fabric, we found the coat not resting upon Dior's shoulders, but lying on her cabin floor. And looking up to her small bed with tiny blood-red eyes, we learned the whys of it."

The Last Liathe rubbed her chin, wincing.

"Reyne and Dior were … occupied with each other."

"Ah." The historian sat up straighter, rolling his shoulders. "Excellent."

"… What is?"

"I was just thinking it had been altogether too long since we had an indecent interlude in this history." Jean-François cracked his knuckles, dipped his quill into his inkpot. "I confess I'm rather in the mood for some tastefully recounted debauchery."

"You wish me to … describe their intimate moments?"

"Why not?" Jean-François asked. "Your brother tells me about his."

"*Does* he."

"Oh, oui. Every chance he gets. He's actually surprisingly talented at it. Nothing too lewd nor lascivious; no proudly pulsing manroots or dewy lady gardens or whathaveyou."

"*Lady* gardens."

"So I've seen them called. By lesser narrators than your brother, of course."

"Sweet God in heaven, Gabriel…"

The Last Liathe turned her face skyward, eyes closed. And though she'd no need for breath, still she inhaled, as if in search for calm. For five long beats of a mortal's heart Celene was still as stone. And when she exhaled, she opened her eyes, her stare so cold she might have froze the river between them.

"Soak me in oil," Celene declared. "Burn me with flame. But I will *not* be recounting the bedroom exploits of the Scion of Heaven for your base amusements, seigneur."

"Why? Are you shy?"

"No. I am simply not a pervert."

"Ah." The historian smirked, twirling his quill. "A prude, then."

"I find it remarkable that a kith decades dead is interested in hearing about the sexual exploits of a seventeen-year-old girl."

"*I* find it remarkable you are squeamish in recounting them, whilst perfectly content to describe decapitations, dismemberment, and wild-eyed cannibalism. Graphic violence is perfectly acceptable, yet amours between loving partners is somehow abhorrent?"

"Might I continue, seigneur? I believe that at least your Empress is of the opinion that time is of essence here."

The historian rolled his eyes.

"*You're* the one who brought us into her bedroom, mademoiselle."

"Only as a prelude. For while we'll not violate her privacy, we *will* say this: In the dance upon those sheets between Grail and Princess, Dior was the seasoned hand, and Reyne, the trembling novice. And while the Princess á Maergenn was doubtless pleased to find herself bare and breathless beneath the gentle press of the Grail's lips and hands, she lacked the experience Dior quite clearly possessed. And finally …

"'Stop,' Reyne whispered.

"Dior was lost in the moment's heat, unaware of how close to Reyne's limits she'd strayed. Her descent continued; a wave of warm kisses down the Princess's heaving belly, breathing her in as the flame breathes air.

"'God, you smell good enough to—'

"'Dior. I said *stop*.'

"'Wuh?' The Grail surfaced, lips flushed, parted as she blinked. 'What's wrong?'

"'Nothing.' Reyne pulled Dior back up her body. 'Nothing's wrong.'

"'Are you not liking…'

"'I like it fine.' Reyne caressed Dior's cheek, dragging the messy mop of hair from her brow. And after a long, sweet kiss, the Princess drew back to search Dior's eyes. 'God, I *more* than like it. You make me feel like I was never *alive* before I found this. Just … not there. Not yet. You understand, oui?'

"Dior sat up, drawing a deep breath and blinking hard.

"'Oh. Of course.'

"The Grail glanced around the darkened room, as if coming back to herself.

"'Well. Shit.'

"'I'm sorry,' Reyne murmured.

"'No, don't be.' The Grail found a smile, pressed her lips to Reyne's. 'As my Queen wills, shall it be done. And if *wait* she commands, then wait I shall.'

"Reyne smiled in return, running gentle fingertips over Dior's mouth.

"'Am I? Your Queen?'

"Dior smirked, smacking the older girl's bare backside. 'Not today, apparently.'

"Reyne frowned as the Grail rolled out of bed and dragged on her shirt, scooting her britches up over her hips.

"'… Where are you going?'

"'Fancied I might throw myself over the side in despair at your rejection.'

"'Dior…'

"'I *jest.*' The Grail grinned, kissing her Princess again. 'Just … *restless* is all. If I can't spend some sweat on you, think I'll go have a smoke. Settles the nerves, oui?'

"'… Are you sure you're aright?'

"'I'm better than aright, Princess.'

"Dior pressed soft kisses to Reyne's cheeks, nose, mouth.

"'I'm in love.'

"Reyne's eyes grew wide at that, a flush rising on her cheeks to match the smile on her lips. But before she could reply, Dior tossed on her jacket, whisking out the door in a flurry of blue velvet and ashen hair. Leaving the naked Princess behind us, we rode along with the Grail, tucked in the shadows beneath her coat's collar.

"Dior thrust her fists into her pockets, nodding to Joaquin and another of her Unbound, standing on guard a tasteful distance from her door. The pair fell into step behind, Elaina following with tail wagging as Dior fairly stormed up the spiral stairwell to the *Dawnseeker*'s forecastle. Another pair of bodyguards joined Joaquin and his comrade, standing about the Grail as Dior propped a cigarelle on her lips and struck her flintbox.

"She breathed deep, lashes fluttering, holding the smoke inside her lungs.

And opening her eyes, she glanced at Joaquin, exhaling a word in a cloud of thin grey.

"'Maids.'

"The lad chuckled, brushing long dark locks from his face. Joaquin Marenn was a handsome young fellow and he knew it; no doubt experienced with the inexperienced.

"'Still no blessings from Angel Fortuna, Mlle du Graal?'

"'Three weeks aboard this bucket and barely a nibble.' Dior dragged fiercely on her smoke. 'If I'd a pair of balls, M. Marenn, they'd be blue as this fucking ocean used to be.'

"'She *is* a princess.' Joaquin winced. 'Never the easiest mark to hit. But she'll be a prize worth the wait, I'll wager. She's a beauty, your girl.'

"'So am I!' Dior cried, taking in her body with a wave. 'Look at this plunder! Young! Plucky! Not much in way of cleavage admittedly, but you could bounce a gold royale off this arse and get an emperor's ransom in change.' She began pacing, dragging on her cigarelle as she glanced at Joaquin. 'Fucking hell, I'm almost thirsty enough to jump *your* bones.'

"'I live to serve, holy maid. Shall I get my kit off here, or march down to the galley and smother myself in ship's gravy?'

"The Grail chuckled, kneeling to scratch Elaina and looking the houndboy over. 'You know, I like you, M. Marenn. You're pretty. You smell nice. And you've some cheek on you, too. You've not got a dark secret, have you? Not actually a girl dressed in boy's clothes?'

"'That's a bit clichéd, don't you think?'

"'Fuck you.'

"'As it please.' Joaquin heaved a world-weary sigh. 'I'll head downstairs and find a bedpost to tie myself to, then. Jacko can help, he's good with knots.'

"The houndboy winked at one of the other Unbound; a tall seaman whose cheeks had flushed almost as red as his beard with all this ribald talk. Dior's other guardians looked equally abashed—each was a full-grown man, hardened by battle and trial, but the Holy Grail of San Michon was a streetwalker's daughter after all, her manner apparently crude enough to make even sailors blush.

"'Jacko's good,' she nodded. 'But I hear Callum is better.'

"'Which Callum?' Joaquin frowned. 'We've got two.'

"'We've got three.' Dior counted on her fingers. 'Callum á Sadhbh. Callum á Cuinn. Callum á Fas. Four if you count Snots, he's a Callum, too. *Snots* is just a nickname. A rather unfortunate one, now I come to think of it.'

"'I didn't know that.'

"'Well, he's not sworn a holy oath to die for *you,* so I don't s'pose you need t—'

"'Might I speak with you?'

"Elaina's ears pinned back as she barked aloud. Dior rose to her feet, found us stood behind her, pale frockcoat whipping in the wind as the hound barked again. The Grail's eyes narrowed, her merriment with Joaquin forgot. She and we had not spoken much since we set out to sea weeks back. Truth told, we'd not really spoken much during her captivity in Dún Maergenn either; limited as we were to words we could spell out on her hand with our moth. But we sensed a divide between us now, grown wider since we'd clashed with Gabriel in the tomb beneath Dún Maergenn. If we did nothing to close it …

"Dior shrugged. 'Speak.'

"We glanced to the houndboy, to Jacko and the other Unbound, and after a moment, Dior gave a nod. Joaquin took hold of Elaina's collar, and he and his fellows retreated—out of earshot perhaps, but certainly not sight. The Grail was watching us, eyes narrowed against the plumes of grey billowing off her lips.

"'You seem … agitated of late,' we began.

"'Nothing a long ice bath won't fix.'

"'We think that untrue, chérie. You put up a brave front, but you bear a weight no one aboard this vessel can truly understand. We can help you alleviate it.'

"'That a fact?'

"'We are your servants, Dior. All of us.'

"The Grail sucked her lip, blue eyes roaming our body, boots to brow. Her gaze was a puzzle, but as ever, I could not read her thoughts, nor grasp her pieces. And with a final drag upon her cigarelle, Dior flicked it overboard, breathing grey as she stepped closer.

"'First time for everything, I s'pose. But no biting, oui?'

"We blinked, eyes drifting toward her lips. 'I … we…'

"'You mind taking bottom bunk?' Clever fingers twisted the buttons of our coat open, one after another. 'I don't share the top.'

"'Dior…'

"Her hands slipped inside our coat now, over our hips to cup our backside. We were drenched in panic, thinking she'd mistaken our offer as some kind of overture, frantically trying to ponder some way to beg off without giving offense.

"But Dior frowned, squeezing the seat of our britches.

"'Wait … what's this?'

"And withdrawing her good hand, holding it up before our widening eyes, we realized she was flipping us the Fathers.

"'Oh, thank the holy Redeemer…'

"'I wish you cast a reflection, Castia. Just so you could see the look on your fucking face right now.'

"We scoffed at that, awash with relief. Dior was clearly delighted to see us so off-balance, and caught up in her smile, we found ourselves chuckling, one hand to our ruined mouth to smother the mirth. The Grail burst into laughter then, and I felt some dam within me break; a dark flood unleashed. For the first time in as long as I could remember, those voices inside fell *utterly* still as I stood with Dior and simply laughed, each of us bending double as her bodyguards looked on with baffled expressions.

"It was a strange thing, but amid all the blood and miles and trials, I'd not really taken time to consider it. Yet I realized in that moment I truly *liked* this girl. Not we, mind you. *Me*. Celene Castia. Dior Lachance was bawdy and she was brave. She cared little for others' opinions, but deeply for others' lives. She knew the names of every man who served her. She knew their *stories*. Yet in the end, she wrote her own. She reminded me of the girl I'd once been—that girl who dreamed of escaping her tiny life in Lorson, of traveling to places far and flung, no care for amorrow. And in that moment, I knew it true.

"Dior Lachance and Celene Castia would've been friends.

"'You know, I think that's the first time I've heard you laugh.' Dior wiped a tear away, grinning wide. 'It's good for the soul. I should make you do it more often.'

"'If anyone aboard this ship could, I think it would be you.'

"'Ah, flattery. You *must* want something important.'

"'Only to help.' We cleared our throat, murmuring now. 'We know you are … frustrated with the Princess. We propose another way to spend your energies. And time.'

"'You *do* want bottom bunk then.'

"'I think not,' we smiled. 'But during your captivity, we noticed a … strangeness with your blood. As we're sure did you.'

"Dior's eyes grew wide, all jest vanished now. 'It shied away from the knife when I cauterized my foot. Like it was alive. Like it could feel what I was thinking. And when I fought Lilidh, when I wanted it to move, I could almost…'

"We dug our fingernails into our palm then, willing it forth—a sluice of deep red, snaking into the air and forming itself into a long, thin blade.

"Dior's lips parted. 'You think *I* could … learn how to do *that*?'

"'We know not. But the five bloodlines, their gifts, all of this stems from the curse of he whose legacy you bear. We have seen you move your blood aready. And we have seen kith burned to ashes at its touch. If you could wield it as a weapon…'

"She looked down at her good hand, whispering, 'Fuck me.'

"'No. Fuck *him*.'

"Dior blinked, understanding at last. 'Voss.'

"'We know not why he wants you. But we sail toward his legions, Dior. I think it best to arm you as well as I am able should ever you meet our

Forever King upon the field.'

"'Gabe always said it was foolish to risk your emperor in battle.'

"'All due respect. But life is not a game of chess, chérie.'

"Her eyes sparkled with dark delight. 'Intrigued, you may consider me.'

"'We should keep this between us. Meet us at midnight, in the hold beneath the forecastle. If you think you can slip the gaze of your legion of loyal Callums?'

"'They're good men. But I'm better.'

"*'Dior? '*

"The fleshwitch was standing at the wheelhouse with the capitaine, calling now, suspicious eyes locked on us. The Grail answered, turning from us and walking away. Our smile was hidden by our scarf as we passed the pair by, slipping down the stair belowdecks. So the duskdancer sought to stand taller in Dior's favor? Well, two could play at that game, Marquis. And machinations aside, I *did* think it best the Grail be prepared for the inevitable war ahead, no matter how Dúnnsair might try to shield her from it. If I grew closer in Dior's counsel as result? All the better to steer her true.

"*This blackened veil shall be undone.*

"So it was, I was feeling well pleased with myself as we slipped toward the forehold, intent to clear a space to practice that eve.

"It was as we passed a porthole that he struck us.

"A shadow moving at the corner of our eye, smashing against the glass with an audible *thump*. We flinched back, claws poised upon our palms. And it was then we saw him, just as in Maryn's cabin. A dark shape, pressing against the porthole glass, as if that warped mirror were some doorway through which he sought entry back into our world.

"But that was impossible.

"He was *dead.*

"*Bonsoir, Petit Monstre.*

"'Wulfric,' we breathed.

"He shook his head, a baritone growl slipping his lips. *Ye mean Master.*

"'No,' I hissed, fists clenched. '*I* am Master here.'

"He laughed then. And that choir, that *cacophony,* boiled up inside me; the voice of every victim, every soul I'd redeemed at his command, rising in unison and laughing with him. But I closed my eyes, knuckles to lashes, whispering once more.

"'*O Lord of Love, O God of Blood,*

"'*O King of Wolf and Lamb,*

"'*Thy will be done—'*

"'Ye aright?'

"I opened our eyes, looking up the corridor to find two figures staring at me. The first was a mere hound—sleek Elaina, teeth bared in a quiet but hateful snarl. But the second was Phoebe, golden eyes narrowed, talons curled. She’d blooded those claws to the armpits in the assault upon Dún Maergenn, leading her folk to a victory none could’ve hoped for. I could see that strength in her still, the vow she’d made Dior never far from her surface.

“*If by my blood or boon or breath might ye be kept safe …*

“‘We are well, fleshwitch. Trouble yourself not on our account.’

“‘Nae trouble a’tall.’ Phoebe stooped to scratch Elaina’s chin. ‘Ye know, yer brother told me what ye did, maebh’lair. Betraying yer teacher. Butchering his father an’ all.’

“‘I am sure Gabriel told you all he knows about the matter. Absolutely nothing.’

“‘I know yer own kinsman trusts ye far as he can spit ye. I know it’s through yer deceits that Dior was slain by the Heartless. And I know I’ll be thrice damned if I let ye place her in danger again.’

“‘Shall I speak then of what *I* know, Phoebe á Dúnnsair?’ we asked. ‘I know despite your oath to keep Dior safe, you still found time in pursuit of her to dally with my brother. I know that you lay with another man while your own trothed husband languished in slavery to the Dyvok. And I know your sweet Connor would likely not be dead if you’d spent half as much time searching for him as you spent trying to get my brother into your bed.’

“Phoebe glowered, lips peeling back from her teeth as we spat.

“‘But most, I know I do not give a *damn* what you think of us, fleshwitch.’

“The duskdancer stared, long and hard. Hers was the strength of the Moonsthrone Mountains, claws drenched with kith and kin alike, and I knew not who between us might prove the stronger if it came to blows. But finally, Phoebe hawked a mouthful of spit upon the boards, and with a whistle to the hound, stalked up the staircase into the light above.

“We were alone.

“It took a moment to understand. But we blinked, looking into that porthole and feeling the ice thaw in our belly. No shadow stared back from that reflection, no monster pressed against that glass. There was simply the grey of the waves, crashing against *Dawnseeker*’s skin with the steady cadence of my once but no more beating heart.

“Wulfric was gone.”

VI

ALL BUTTERFLIES

"'AS I BELIEVE a great man once said…'

"The Grail slumped to her backside with a weary sigh.

"'Fuck my *fucking* face.'

"We leaned against the hull, arms folded. 'I believe the *fucking* is superfluous.'

"'At this point, I'll take it any way I can get it.'

"It was six nights later. The witching hour was struck, *Dawnseeker*'s crew abed. Waves were pounding steady on the hull, the scent of blood and sweat hung in the bilge-dank air, and I was beginning to suspect I had made a terrible mistake.

"Our little conspiracy started well enough. True to her word, Dior was able to slip her bodyguards and meet us every midnight beneath the forecastle. The space was ten feet at a side—accessible only by a squeeze through a gap in the ship's stores, lit by a lone chymical globe. The crates kept us hidden from wandering eyes, and the waves from prying ears.

"A teacup of blood sat on the floor, drawn from Dior's wrist with a twist of her boot knife. The cut had healed swiftly, but thoughts of that wondrous red treasure filled my mind constantly, its weight trying to force us to our knees. Though I knew the Grail's blood was deadly to me and all my kind, the scent was nothing short of heavenly. I desperately wanted it, but at the same time, I was utterly terrified of it. So in the end, I did my best to ignore it, seeking only to awake Dior's ability to *manipulate* it.

“We’d explained the basics of sanguimancy to our young apprentice, and Dior had proved a quick study of the principles. But after six long evenings, the practicalities of the arte had utterly eluded her.

“It was frustrating for Dior to be sure. She’d made her blood tremble in the past, yet here and now, she seemed incapable of even that tiny feat. Despite best efforts—teeth gritted, red-faced, sweat-drenched—the Grail’s divine blood simply sat where she’d spilled it, defiantly congealing in a pale porcelain cup adorned with pretty blue flowers.

“Yet if failure was frustrating for Dior, it was *galling* for me. Now I’d taken it upon myself to train her, memories of my time in Wulfric’s tutelage were never far away, and with each failure, his mocking whisper seemed to grow louder in my skull. The chymical globe we practiced by was made of glass, as were the portholes bored into the port and starboard hulls cocooning our little practice space. And in those polished surfaces, every so often, I *swore* I glimpsed him, pressing up against the surface.

“Laughing at me.

“‘Try again,’ we urged. ‘Eyes closed. Thoughts empty. Be it. Feel it.’

“‘I’m trying, but I don’t *feel* anything.’ Dior sat cross-legged, scowling at the teacup. ‘Aside from my skin being three lengths too small and a splitting fucking headache.’

“‘This blood is a part of you, chérie. As much as any limb or eye or tongue. If you wish to make a fist, do you think about the interplays between flesh and muscle and bone and tendon? Or do you simply will your fingers closed?’

“She held up her poor, mangled hand. ‘Being a bit of a cunt now.’

“‘That is not what I meant.’

“‘Accidental cuntery is still a heretical offense. I confess, I’m noting a tangible lack of awe about you recently, Castia. A distinct, dare I say *willful,* failure to tremble at my divinity.’

“The Grail’s lips curled in a hopeful smile, but I found no joy in levity. Instead we sighed, staring out the porthole in a search for calm. Dior chewed a ragged fingernail, glancing at the bloody cup and folding her legs beneath her.

“‘Look, maybe I just can’t do this.’

“‘You manipulated your blood when you fought Lilidh in Maryn’s tomb.’

“‘I think you’re overselling it. I yelled at it to move, and all it managed to do was embarrass me. Perhaps I just don’t have this in me.’

“*Or perhaps it is* thee *who art lacking, Petit Monstre.*

“We glanced up at that whisper, belly running cold. And in the porthole, we saw him again—pale and beautiful, swathed all in black. He stepped closer, nailing us to the floor with those bottomless eyes, bloodless hands pressed flat against that glass.

“*Ye told me that once, oui? No such thing as a poor student. Only a poor* *teacher.*

"'Be *silent,*' I hissed, vicious.

"Dior glanced up. 'I didn't say anything.'

"I swallowed, willing my mind still as we looked instead to the Grail. 'Try again. Please. *Feel* the blood as part of you. An extension of all you are. Do not think. *Know.*'

"The Grail breathed deep, focusing on the teacup. We'd turned from the porthole, willing that dreadful shadow gone. But of course, there was another in the opposite wall, and as soon as we'd set our back to one, the figure appeared in the other.

"*Ye were always thy mother's daughter,* he told me. *Pride was Auriél de León's undoing, and so shall it be with thee. Think ye thou canst gift this child mastery of something ye only stole? Thou shalt never be the teacher I was. Nor the* monster *I was.*

"'And for that,' I whispered, 'I thank God *nightly*.'

"*Fool. Weakling.*

"'If I am so weak, how is it I defeated *you*?'

"*Treachery,* he growled, eyes aflame. *Deception was* ever *thy greatest gift, Celene Castia. Thy precious Laurent could testify to that.*

"I froze at those words, every inch of me now bristling with rage.

"'Do not *dare* say his name.'

"'Celene?' Dior looked up again, frowning. 'Are … are you aright?'

"But my ears were deaf to her in that moment, eyes fixed on that shadow beyond the glass. I could see him *so* clearly now; in the porthole, in the chymical globe, in the glint of Dior's boot buckles and the polished gold buttons on my own two sleeves.

"*Miss him, dost thou? Thy precious songbird? Art thou still th—*

"'Shut up,' I hissed, fingernails digging into my palms.

"Dior rose to her feet, blanching as she saw the blood trickling from my hands.

"'Celene, what's wrong?'

"I gritted our teeth, fists clenched, trying to fill my mind with prayer. But those voices within were cacophony now, crashing upon the bounds of my skull, the waves pounding in time upon *Dawnseeker*'s hull. Dior stood uncertain, watching as I dragged bloody hands back through our hair, pressing red knuckles upon our temples.

"And upon the floor, a porcelain cup with pretty blue flowers trembled.

"'I am stone,' I hissed, staring at that horror in the glass. 'I am the *Mountain.*'

"*Thine own fault it was. Know ye this, aye?*

"'Shut *up*. Shut up shut*up*—'

"*Thou hast doomed us all. And all for a love as doomed as—*

"'*SHUTUP!* '

"I've no memory of what came next. I can only tell you what happened because Dior told me afterward. I do not remember her reaching out to me, her gentle touch to my shoulder. I do not remember snapping, hands flung out at my sides, bloodblade coalescing in one fist. I do not remember Dior's sharp intake of breath, the fear in her eyes, her hands rising up to ward off my blow. I remember only the song of porcelain, the whip-*snap* of tearing air. And before Dior's upraised hands, a sharp blade of blood hung poised; a *perfect* needle, glittering but a few inches from our throat.

"I came back to myself, blinking hard, that voice fallen blessedly, suddenly still. In a heartbeat we stepped away, drawing our blade back into lacerated palms.

"'Dior, oh Seven Martyrs, forgive us.'

"'Holy *shit,*' she breathed.

"Her eyes were fixed not on me, but on the blood now hovering between us. That needle hung poised in the air, razored and red; fashioned wholly and solely of her will. Yet as soon as she began to *think* upon it, her blood began to tremble. And though the Grail clenched her teeth, begging 'Nono*no,*' her bloodblade collapsed utterly then, falling from the air and spattering all over the timbers between us.

"*Dawnseeker* sailed on, crashing heedless through black oceans, waves pounding relentless upon her skin. Yet in that hold, all seemed eerily still. Dior sank into a crouch over the crimson sluice that had been her blade, palm to the floorboards.

"'God help me, Dior, I am so s—'

"'I did it,' she whispered.

"She looked up at us, pale blue eyes not bright with fear or wet with tears, but *blazing* with a feral, bloody triumph.

"'Celene, I fucking *did* it!'

"We blinked, taken aback. I thought she might be afeared of us now, our fragile trust broken. But instead, Dior was fixed upon her victory, running her fingers through the spatter, holding them up before her wondering eyes.

"'I just don't know *how…'*

"'You did not think.' We shrugged. 'You were afraid. And you made a fist.'

"We sank down onto the timbers beside her, conscious of the crimson slicked between us. That blood had killed Danton Voss after all. Burned Lilidh Dyvok to ashes. But still, we were more afeared of the damage we might have done to her.

"'Dior, we are sorry. We did … *I* did not mean to frighten you.'

"'S'aright. You couldn't help it.'

"The Grail pouted, eyes clouded as if unsure whether or not to speak. But finally …

"'You're hearing them, aren't you? The others inside you.'

"'You … how could you possibly know that?'

"'I've overheard Maryn. Arguing with herself. She's in the cabin next to mine, she keeps it quiet but…' Dior shrugged. 'Small ship. Good ears. Sharp as three swords, me.'

"We pursed our ruined lips, voice gone soft.

"'They have always been there,' we confessed. 'But never this loud. Ever since Maryn woke, we … I hear them all the time. I think our … closeness to each other makes it worse. I think perhaps that is why the Faithful dwelled alone after Charbourg's fall.'

"'Why don't you ask Maryn about it?'

"We glanced up to that shadow on the glass. The shadow we didn't wish her to see.

"'I have done … questionable things, Dior. I fear what Maryn will make of me if she learns the truth. It is selfish, I know. But I am weak.'

"'Being frightened doesn't make you weak, Celene. It makes you human.'

"We clenched our jaw at that, and I found I could no longer meet her eyes. Instead, we snaked upright, turning away. Dior was showing us kindness, and truth told, we were unused to kindness. Glancing up, I saw that shadow on the glass again, distant, but waiting.

"Watching.

"'I'm not sure what to make of you, Celene.' Dior sighed. 'One moment, you seem a monster. The fanatic who tried to murder her own brother. The next, I start to think you might genuinely *care*. Not just about this world, but about the people in it. About me.'

"We turned back then, meeting her eyes. 'I *do*.'

"'Thing is, I don't even know who I'm talking to right now. One moment, you call yourself *I* and the next *we,* and I'm not sure I understand the difference. Are you … *you*? Or are you all the lives you've stolen? Gabe's baby sister? Liathe of the Esana? Are you a cannibal bloodwitch from a cult of vampire heretics, or just a girl who got dragged into something a thousand times bigger than she could *ever* be, wondering how the hell she got here?' Dior scoffed then, sadness in her smile. 'I can sympathize with that one.'

"I looked down at our hand. Pale as marble. Hard as granite.

"'When I was little, my papa told me it was the fate of all Castias to bear the burden of this life on their shoulders, that others might be spared it. *Steel rusts,* he said. *Ice melts*. *But stone stands.* Little Mountain, he called me. And so I am. Unbreakable. Unchangeable.'

"'Everything changes, Celene. I'm not old, but I'm old enough to know that.'

"'Nothing truly changes, Dior. Not *truly*.'

"But she only shook her head, stubborn and fierce and so *very* young. 'Joaquin Marenn was a houndboy. Now he's a holy warrior. I was a whorechild. Now I'm Scion of Heaven. Aaron and Baptiste. Phoebe. Even

Gabe … God, *especially* Gabe. Sometimes life changes us for the better. Sometimes the worse. But everything under the sky is in the process of becoming something else. Something *new*. This is a world of butterflies, Celene.'

"She shrugged.

"'We're all butterflies.'

"I looked her over then. This girl from the gutters of Lashaame. This Godling from the pages of prophecy. Pale skin and ashen hair. Mangled hand and iron will. She'd never even seen a true dawn. Only seventeen years beneath this blackened sun. I wondered how she knew what a butterfly was at all. And yet …

"'You've become quite profound of late, Dior Lachance. We will admit that.'

"She scoffed. 'Rising from the dead will have that effect on a girl.'

"We chewed the torn flesh of our lip then, meeting her eyes. 'Did you … When you were gone, I mean. Did you…'

"'See anything?'

"'Oui.'

"'… No.'

"We sighed, sinking into a crouch, spine against the hull. We could feel the currents rolling beneath us, shadows moving slow upon that porthole glass once more.

"'Only a matter of time before I see it myself, I suppose. When we first met, Master Wulfric told me even lionesses only get nine lives. I lost one that very night, saving my brother's. And by my counting, I've spent almost all of them since.'

"'I'd like to hear about them.'

"I looked to Dior then, found her searching what she could see of our face.

"'You've told me the history of the Esana. The Red Crusade, the Charbourg's fall, all that shite. But that story you just coughed up about your papa? That's the first thing you've ever told me about *yourself,* you know that?'

"'My story does not matter. Save that it is part of yours.'

"'Bollocks. Look, I know you've … company in there aready'—Dior waved vaguely at our head—'but if I'm talking true, you strike me as a little lonely, Celene. We're on this boat fuck knows where 'til fuck knows when. So if you want to talk…'

"'We have more important things to do than talk, Dior.' We glanced at the blood slicked upon the timbers. 'Teaching you how to move *that* again, for example.'

"'Maybe you could take that scarf off your face?'

"I blinked, quizzical. Dior shrugged.

"'I mean, frightening shit out of me seemed to work the last time, so…'

“I scoffed, aiming a playful kick at her shins. The Grail yelped and rolled away across the timbers, laughing all the while. And again, I found myself laughing with her. As she tossed the mop of hair from her eyes and gifted me a wicked grin, I realized the voices within me had fallen quiet—as if they all found this girl as fascinating as I.

“‘Made you laugh again. I’m getting good at that.’

“‘If only you proved as adept at your other studies.’

“‘See there’s that cuntery I talked about. You know who the hell I am, don’t you?’

“I stared at the slick of red. Bright. Brilliant. Its surface so smooth it was as glass, casting a dark reflection of the timbered ceiling above us. But unlike every other mirror about me recently, I saw no shadows there.

“‘I know who you are. Gutterchild. Lightbringer. Heavensent. But it’s true you do not know *me*. So I propose a bargain. One that will spare me having to unveil the horrors beneath this scarf.’

“‘I was only jesting, I didn’t m—’

“I silenced her protest with a scowl and a wave.

“‘My master was cruel to me when I failed. And I failed often. But I am *not* the teacher he was. So rather than punish you when you fall, I shall reward you when you fly.’

“‘I already told you I prefer girls with a pulse, Castia.’

“‘You wish to hear my story, do you not?’

“‘Oui.’

“‘So I shall tell it. For every task you master, my young ’prentice, I shall tell you how Celene Castia lost one of her lives.’

“She smiled then, utterly delighted. ‘Intrigued, you may consider me.’

“We shook hands upon our bargain, Dior’s skin warm against my own, her eyes ablaze. And if I held on a moment too long, it was only because *in* that moment, I felt the same; buoyed up by the light and life of her, that holy gift, that child of God, that shining piece of heaven made manifest upon this sunless earth.

“‘Come,’ we said. ‘The hour is late. You should abed.’

“But she scoffed then, scooping the teacup off the boards. ‘The only thing waiting for me in bed is the reminder there’s no one else in it. This just got *far* more interesting.’

“Sitting cross-legged, she set the cup upon the timbers.

“‘Let’s get back to it, Little Mountain.’”

VII

INTO THE FIRE

"AND SO IT went. Cutting southward down the coast of Sūdhaem. Snaking rips and seething reefs, the swordmaid at *Dawnseeker*'s prow ever pointing our way. The winds whipped us onward, as if God himself willed us toward the sainted blade. But when those winds failed, Dior's Unbound bent their backs to the oars and kept us speeding over the waves. A thrall's power will slowly diminish unless they sup regular from the wrists of their masters, but by some measure of Dior's holy blood, the former scorched of the Dyvok somehow *retained* their strength. Joaquin and Jacko and the four Callums and the rest sang hymns to God and rowed like men possessed, the oars creaking dangerously with the strain.

"And on we crashed through the rolling swells.

"Mother Maryn still bore the fatigue of eventide, and though we prayed together each dawn and dusk, she spent much of her time in solitude. Phoebe kept company with Reyne and Dior, and watchful eyes *ever* upon me. The Princess and Grail trained every day, but though Reyne's skill was enviable, the forms she taught were entirely defensive—it was clear neither of the Ossians had any real intention of putting Dior near a battle.

"And thus, when she came to me every midnight, the Grail was *hungry*.

"Our next breakthrough came a week after she'd formed her needle of blood. Red-faced, panting, she managed to bid a single shivering drop rise from the teacup, glittering like a tiny pearl. It only lasted a moment—Dior cursing as that jewel splashed onto the floor. But though small, it was her first true step down the red road of sanguimancy.

"And so, came her reward.

"I told her the tale of my first meeting with the vampire who would become my master. But you have heard *that* tale before, seigneur—my mother calling for Wulfric's aid when Gabriel fell ill, and Wulfric's refusal to help his son. The Grail nodded approval when I told her of my gambit—threatening Wulfric's cat with my knife before he overpowered me. I told Dior how I called him Monster, and how the scorn of that eleven-year-old girl sobered his deadly rage. And when I spoke of his warning—that I should be careful how I spent the eight lives that remained me—Dior summed up her feelings with a single word.

"'Prick.'

"Our next milestone came a fortnight later; Dior finally managing to lift the contents of the teacup into the air. The globe of blood hung but a hair's breadth above the cup's lip—a misshapen, trembling blob of crimson. She actually fainted with the effort of it, but it was another victory. And so, I propped her against the pillar in the heart of our practice space to catch her breath, and told her the name of the foe that claimed my third life.

"'Fire?' she repeated.

"'Oui.'

"'Don't have much luck with it, do you?'

"'No. But my first taste was even worse than the one Kiara gave me at Cairnhaem.'

"Dior leaned back against the pillar, propping a cigarelle upon her lips with unsteady hands. Patting her coat pockets, she pulled out her travelworn flintbox, brow raised.

"'Do you mind?'

"'No,' we said, shifting back a few feet. 'You bear little resemblance to a pack of angry Nordishmen, Dior. Nor your flintbox to a flaming brand.'

"She nodded, striking flame and breathing deep. 'Angry Nordishmen, eh?'

"We sighed then, looking back across the mists of time. I have said it before, but it can be a strange thing to be one of the Faithful, seigneur. The souls you carry, the minds within … they bleed very far into your own. Memories that do not belong to you can rise unbidden, faces you have never seen seem as familiar as a friend's. But there are some days that remain yours forever.

"'I lost my second life at the hands of Laure Voss,' I began. 'She came to Lorson as revenge after my brother interfered in her father's plans. She killed the boy who loved me in front of my eyes. Tore my throat out and drank me to death. But you know this already.'

"'I didn't know she killed your beloved.'

"'His name was Philippe.'

"'I'm sorry, Celene.'

“We nodded, the air gone heavy. Our eyes focused on the cigarelle’s tip, flaring as the Grail inhaled. Remembering the stink of our own burning flesh.

“‘I awoke after Laure murdered me. No sense of time passed, no memory of what had happened, save it had been awful. It all felt like a dream. Yet pawing at my eyes, I realized they were not gummed by sleep, but frozen blood, and looking about, I realized I was not safe in bed at home, but half buried by snow in a forest clearing. And though the sun had sunk low through the branches, the woods were strangely bright.

“‘I saw Philippe’s body then, remembering all. But past the horror of what Laure had done, wondering how I had died but yet lived, still I recalled she had come to Lorson for ma famille. And rising, I ran home, two thoughts pounding with my feet on frozen earth.

“‘*Mama …*

“‘*Papa …*

“‘I ran, the gloom bright all around me, not merely the sights, but the sounds, the *sensations* overwhelming. But one sense burned brighter than the rest; the air alight with the stink of burned timber and scorched meat and something else, something darker, stabbing sharper with every step toward Lorson. I clutched my stomach, shaking, pleading as I broke free of the wood and back into the village that had been my home.

“‘It was nothing but a ruin, scorched and gutted. I saw corpses in the snow, babies scattered like fallen leaves, closing my night-bright eyes against the horror. And staggering toward our house, I found them, lying in the yard where she’d ended them.

“‘Mama was belly-down in the snow, her loss cutting me deep as bone. But then I saw my dear papa, who’d held me tight and told me since I was little that I was stone, I was the *Mountain*. And if that were true, then the sight of him lifeless left me in rubble.

“‘I longed to simply press my cheek against his chest and close my eyes. But the growing ache in me refused to let me lie down and die among my kin. What had begun as a spark was now a forest fire, roaring in my veins. To speak of it to mortals is to speak of screaming to the deaf. You think you know its pain. But in truth, you know only its name.’

“The Grail breathed a cloud of grey smoke. ‘Hunger.’

“I nodded. ‘Twisting up from Papa’s side, I went in search of a morsel to end that hateful ache. I found no food; the houses, the taverne, all incinerated. The chapel was still standing, yet when I tried to enter, I found my way barred by some invisible hand, some dreadful sense of *unwelcome*. As the dark sun kissed the horizon, I stood on tiptoe to peer inside, and thought my mind must be playing tricks. For though I could see the ruins’ reflection behind me in those smoke-black windows, I could not see *myself*.

“‘And then I heard it; faint even with these strange new senses. Distant but, oui …

"'*Voices*.

"'I saw silhouettes on the outskirts, burning torches in hand. *Men,* I realized. Half a dozen at least. I heard a snatch of prayer, saw a flash of torchlight on a longblade. And the humming in my heart became a hymn as I realized what they were.

"'Sanctuary.

"'Salvation.

"'*Soldiers*.

"'I waved, shouting, the first words I'd spoken since I fell. But the noise was a gargle, shapeless and mangled. Reaching up, I found only a few ropes of meat and sticky tendon below my jaw, and through the gaping hole that had been my throat dangled a long cord of muscle—my tongue, I realized. Slick and greasy with cold gore.

"'I heard a horrified cry, and looking up I saw the men, wide eyes on me as they fumbled for their weapons. They were a motley group, poorly armed and barely armored. I'd mistaken them for soldiers come to Lorson's aid, but now I saw they wore no sigil of baron or emperor, and I realized what they were in truth.'

"'Thieves,' Dior murmured.

"'Oui,' I sneered. 'These were the years before the Forever King crossed the Bay of Tears. But since daysdeath fell, Nordlund had become a haven for bottom-feeders—men whose livelihoods failed as the sun did, turning to robbery and deeds darker still.

"'Men like these.

"'A tall fellow with a bristling beard pointed at me, *Monster!,* and a short man with crooked teeth shouted, *Seven Martyrs, fucking kill it!* And just as terrified as they, I turned to run, back toward the wood and whatever safety it held.

"'I heard a *THUMP* then. And looking down, I saw a feathered shaft protruding from my thigh. A second arrow hit me square, sinking into my chest. It did not hurt as such, but still I *felt* it, breaking through the rime of numbness that had settled on me. Looking up, I saw a bucktoothed lad with a longbow, knocking another arrow.

"'I'd always been a rough-and-tumble scrap of a girl. A girl who'd worked her feelings out with her hands. And as his third arrow thumped into my belly with something close to but not quite pain, my feelings became clear as broken glass.

"'Ma famille were murdered. My beau. My village. And though they'd smelled the smoke, perhaps even heard the screams, these men had not come to help Lorson in her hour of need. They'd come to strip her corpse. If I saw keener, smelled sharper since I'd fallen to that monster's teeth, I *felt* deeper too. And what I felt now was rage.

"'They roared as I charged, moving as if in molasses as I flew toward the bucktoothed archer. I smelled his bowels loosing as he turned to run. And though I reached out only to break his bow, I ended up breaking him.

"'All was chaos now, men fleeing, others shouting, the bravest stepping in to defend their fallen fellow. But though their blades bit deep, they did not quite *hurt* me.

"'Not the way I hurt them back.

"'The first, I hit as he stabbed me, breaking him like he was clay. I struck the second's throat when he lunged, and as he fell, it struck me, deeper than any arrow to the chest. That color, that beautiful, glittering *red,* spattered on my face and hands. And the heat that had been growing in my belly flared, like coals in my papa's forge, bursting into fire.

"'I lunged, senseless, time and place forgot as I pushed my ruined face into that brigand's rushing throat. The man screamed, trying to throw me off, but I was deaf to all save the thunder of his pulse as that first wondrous taste touched my tongue.'

"I fell silent then, crashing waves on the hull the only sound. Dior was looking at me with something between horror and fascination, smoke drifting from her nostrils.

"'Do you remember the first time you killed someone?' I asked.

"'Don't we all?'

"'There is a mythology around we kith, Dior. An awful, foolish … wanting. Minstrels sing of it in commonroom ballads, maids whisper of it around the fire at night. The rapture of the Kiss. Its ecstasy. Its *bliss*. But I had no maker to guide me in the art of it. No real idea what I was doing at all, save that I must drink, God, *drink*. There was no rapture for that poor fool in Lorson that day, God help him. I made a mess of him with but half a mouth. He was … *begging* as I killed him. Blubbing like a babe. I was just as frightened—as terrified as I'd *ever* been. Until those flames touched my skin.'

"'His comrades,' the Grail mused. 'Still some honor among thieves.'

"We nodded. 'Kith were still mostly superstition back then. But at least one of those brigands put stock in fireside fancy. The torch touched my skin and the flames caught like I was tinder, horrifying heat biting deeper than any blade. Howling, I threw myself off the bandit's body, tearing away my burning cloak as another roared, *Back, monster! Back!*

"'More thieves were closing in, torches in hand. And skin and hair still ablaze, arrows in my flesh and blood in my mouth, I turned and bolted, fast as I was able.

"'Their curses faded as I sprinted between the dying trees, flames chewing at my bones. All was agony, all was *fire,* blinding and burning. And finally I could run no more, flinging myself into a snowdrift and feeling the flames mercifully die. Wounded, wretched, curling into a ball, I waited for them to find me. To end me as they'd begun.

"'But by some miracle, they'd not followed.

"'I'd been numb since that moment I woke in the snow. But now I remembered *pain*; arms and ribs and face scorched back to the bone. I could still taste that poor man's blood, the horror of what I'd done sinking in, his screams echoing in my skull. Crawling upright, vision blacked by fire, I realized I'd made my way back to the clearing where Laure had murdered me.

"'What was left of my poor Philippe lay in the snow. I kissed his frozen lips as best I could with the mouth that remained me, and I wept. For his ending. For my beginning. I wept the last I had within me, my tears crystal clear at first, running in the end to something thicker, darker, sticky on my ruined cheeks. And I touched my eyes and saw my fingers slicked with red—not tears I cried anymore, but *blood*. And the horror near broke me into a million screaming pieces. Because I knew for certain what I was, then. What I'd become.'

"We looked across the hold to Dior, shrugging slow.

"'A monster. Same as she who'd slaughtered me. I vowed then and there I would *never* drink another mortal's blood. I knew what it was to be butchered upon the block. That fear and suffering. I swore I'd make no other suffer the same.'

"The Grail's eyes were wide, cigarelle dangling from her lips as she whispered.

"'Great Redeemer. I supposed it had been hard for you. But I never…'

"Dior shook her head.

"'What did you do?'

"'The only thing I could. I could seek no help from she who'd murdered me. Nor from my brother, I knew that; not a budding silversaint of San Michon. But I *could* seek it from the one who made him. And so I resolved to trek the frozen wastes of Nordlund until I reached his door; the door he'd mentioned the night my mother called him to her side.'

"We shrugged, brushing a long lock of hair from our eyes.

"'The City of Spears.'

"'San Yves.' Dior leaned forward, eyes alight. 'Did you die again on the way there?'

"'Oh, no,' we scoffed. 'Not tonight, my young 'prentice. You are earning my deaths with mastery of your studies. And your mastery is nothing close.'

"Dior scoffed, aiming a soft kick at my boots. 'Bitch, I'm not *that* bad.'

"'You are not.'

"We lifted pale hands, digging fingernails into our palms. Rationed as we were, blood yet flowed from those gouges, slick and crimson and glistening, that shadow still watching from the porthole glass. Dior stared as our blood formed into myriad shapes—blades and shields and flails, spinning and twisting as our fingers wove the air. And finally, we drew the blood back into our palms, and our body splashed into a sluice of gore on the timbers.

“‘But *not bad* is far from *good.*’

“Dior whirled about and found us standing behind her. Twisting back to look at where our doppelganger had sat moments before, now running in rivulets along the timbers and sluicing back up into our palms. Meeting our eyes again, she scoffed.

“‘Show-off.’

“‘Perhaps. But we are *also* making a point.’

“The Grail nodded. ‘Point taken.’

“And tossing her hair from her eyes, she turned back to her teacup.”

VIII

WITH BLACK LIGHT IT BURNS

“THE AIR WAS beginning to foul as we reached the Cape of Knives.

“I remembered the turn of seasons when I was a little girl; sprays of flowers bursting across the countryside, beautiful trees donning emerald dresses and swaying in sun-warm winds. But since daysdeath, spring in Elidaen had become a miserable affair. Even from *Dawnseeker*’s deck, we could smell the faint scent of rot as snows began melting, hugging the treacherous coastline as we skirted the southernmost tip of Sūdhaem and found the vast black waters of the Eversea before us.

“Cheers and prayers to God Almighty rang across the decks at the sight, Phoebe shaking Capitaine á Connell’s hand, Dior and Reyne sharing a long and smiling kiss. The tradewinds would back us now, speeding us northeast across the Bay of Antoine. If fortune held, we’d be at the gates of Augustin before ever Voss reached them.

“*If* fortune held.

“Though shadows of fatigue still underscored her eyes, Mother Maryn had begun ascending to the deck after prayers each dusk, staring eastward, her cherub’s lips pressed thin. Phoebe and Reyne schooled Dior in swordplay under the watchful eyes of Joaquin and Dior’s other faithful thugs. But still, the Grail met us each midnight, afire with curiosity and some newfound energy. Those few hours we spent together each eve were the brightest of my day, and each milestone in her journey was rewarded with another piece of my tale.

"Another death of Celene Castia.

"When she could lift the contents of her teacup unerringly, I told her of my encounter with imperial troops outside Albon—cut to ribbons and torn by dogs, saved only by flinging myself off a cliff onto fangs of stone below. And the first time she managed to form her blood into a crude blade, I told her of my almost-death in the Vipère."

Jean-François blinked, looking up from his tome. "The river?"

"I had to cross it to reach San Yves. But the Forever King had made his ill-fated attack at the Twins by then, my brother's name spoken with awe around a hundred taverne hearths. The lords of Elidaen knew the truth now; vampires were real, and worse, *ambitious,* gazing with hungry eyes at the fiefdoms mortal men had carved. Garrisons were stationed at every river crossing in Nordlund; gloomy soldiers in the unicorn and yellow tabards of Emperor Alexandre III. And after my encounter in Albon, I was frightened of soldiers. So I sought to cross the river another way."

The historian raised one blond brow, looking to the black waters between them.

"You didn't…"

"I did."

Jean-François snickered, clapping one hand over his mouth. But despite his best efforts, the historian finally burst into raucous laughter. The Last Liathe glowered, seething as the historian shook with mirth, wiping bloody tears from his eyes.

"You tried to *swim* across?"

"I was still learning what I was," she snapped. "Unlike *some,* I'd no mentor to advise me about the perils of fresh running water to our kind. I was schooled by trial and bloody error. Sleeping in snowdrifts and waking with my veins frozen solid. Spewing scarlet fountains until I learned to choke down the blood of rabbits and rats. And oui, wading out into the Vipère rather than cross that bridge and confront its accursed garrison. Mock me for my faith. Spit at me for my failures. But do not *dare* to scorn that I had no mother to primp my golden hair and hold my trembling hand as I fell to darkness. Celene Castia learned alone, seigneur. But by Almighty God, she *learned.*"

Jean-François had stopped laughing now, brushing an errant curl from his cheek.

"So what happened when you tried to swim?"

Celene nodded to the dark floods between them.

"Respectfully, perhaps you might wade in and find out?"

The Last Liathe stared, hard black stare and thin pursed lips. Despite her feigned deference, Jean-François knew she'd still kill him in a *blinking* if she got the chance. But as he dipped his quill, the historian's lips were still curled in a smile.

Because she'd never *get* the chance, would she?

"Continue," he commanded.

The Last Liathe stared for a handful of heartbeats, still and silent as stone.

But with a glance to those flames, she obeyed.

"*Dawnseeker* was well across the Bay of Antoine when next we had a breakthrough. Dior had been struggling to form a blade solid enough to *cut* something. Time and time again, her bloodblade would fail before the rope did, and many were the nights she was practically *weeping* with effort. But she never relented. And after weeks of fruitless cursing and silent pleas to the heavens, our prayers were answered.

"'Eat every *inch* of my shapely arse, you pig-fucking, goat-loving—'

"'It is a piece of string, Dior,' we smiled. 'It cannot hear you.'

"She stood glowering at her victim—two thin strands of hemp, split in twain and hanging from nails in the hull. But after a moment, she blew a stray lock from her eyes and scoffed at me over her shoulder. 'Don't ruin my fun. That's what Reyne's for.'

"We leaned against the hull, hands behind our back. We'd have been uncomfortable talking of such things once—the troubles between lovers. But truth told, I was growing more at ease around this girl. Some nights, we spent more time talking than actually training. The voices in my mind were ever in tumult with Maryn so close, those shadows beneath my surface never far away. But they grew quieter when the Grail was near. And though Dior was my student, in truth, I was thinking of her more and more as a confidant.

"A *friend*.

"'You are still … frustrated in matters amorous between you and Reyne?'

"'One way to put it,' Dior sighed. 'In hindsight, a princess trained in a nunnery by warrior puritans might not have been an ideal choice to try to drag into sin with me.'

"'Perhaps sin is a state best avoided by both of you, Dior.'

"'You sound like Reyne now. Maybe *you* could try bedding her.'

"Lighting a cigarelle, she paced back and forth like some caged wolf.

"'Apologies, I'm being a cunt. Reyne's brilliant. But walking about half-sprung all day is wearing fucking thin, let me tell you. Never choose someone of religious principle to fall in love with, Castia. Not unless fiddling yourself to sleep every night sounds a jolly old time.'

"'I do not think we choose who we fall in love with, Dior.'

"She leaned against the pillar, breathing grey as she met our eyes.

"'Quoting old taverne ballads? Or talking from experience?'

"'I was in love once.'

"'Your Philippe?'

"We shook our head, eyes drifting to the porthole glass. We could see no shadow there, but I knew he was listening. Waiting. 'No. Philippe would have made a fine husband. But though I died with him, I did not die *for* him.'

"Dior looked us over, boots to brow. Smoothing her hair back, she bound it with a thong of leather—it was long enough to tie up now. Eyes narrowed against her cigarelle smoke, she sank to her haunches.

"'You sound like someone with a story to tell.'

"'Five deaths I've told you aready. One life remains us. That leaves three more dyings to account for. But all of them are one, really. One beginning. One end. One name.'

"'Wulfric.'

"'Oui.' I sat opposite, eyes to the floorboards, the past yawning wide before me. 'Two *years* it took me to reach my destination. Two years of fear, of skulking in shadows, of listening to Gabriel's legend grow as I crawled eastward. The horde of exsanguinated rabbits in my wake could have fed half Sūdhaem, my thirst for *true* prey swelling all the while. But my oath held true, my dark appetites in check—I would *not* be the monster I beheld. And finally, I climbed through the fungus-clad deadwoods of the Orhomme foothills, and found it waiting. The great cityfort of San Yves.'

"'The Fifth Martyr,' Dior muttered. 'Yves the Peerless.'

"'He who united Nordlund under the One Faith.'

"'Or led a religious pogrom that killed thousands of innocent men, women and children. Depends on your point of view, doesn't it?'

"'History *does* tend to make idolatry of brutality.'

"'Stories they told us at mass said Yves carried a chariot wheel into battle to honor the Redeemer. Used it for a shield.' The Grail chewed on a fingernail, spat the leavings onto the boards. 'Explains the martyrdom, I s'pose.'

"'Did you ever visit the city of his birth?'

"She scoffed. 'I never set foot outside Lashaame 'til a year back. Was it pretty?'

"'Oh, it was *beautiful,* Dior. Cradled between two spurs at the feet of the Orhomme mountains. Its walls were old and thick, hung with banners stitched with the red field and towered shield of the Famille Durand—the city's first house. At its heart stood a seven-spired cathedral, reaching toward heaven. And at the city's edge, close to the mountains, loomed a grand crown of towers ringed by high black walls.

"'The great Priory of San Yves.

"'The gates were sealed when I arrived, battlements patrolled by soldiers in Durand red. The state of my injury back then was so profound I could barely talk, but even without the horror Laure had made of my face, I could never have simply *walked* inside. I waited 'til nightfall to steal within; swift as a thief between the changing of the guards. And hood pulled low, scarf high, I finally found myself in the City of Spears.

"'It was named for the soldiers who'd marched from its gates during the

Wars of the Faith. But San Yves was no mere fortress. Goldmines in the Orhomme had made the Lords Durand wealthy beyond measure, and San Yves was a *marvel*. Even the lowest dwelling was grander than the cottage I'd been born in, and the highest, palaces to me. I could not help but marvel, looking about with the eyes of a child and vampire both—the glittering lights refracting on frost and stained glass, graven fountains frozen solid, marble angels dancing on the eaves of cathedrals so high they kissed the sky.

"'I could see why the monster who had been my mother's lover called this place home, and I resolved to find Wulfric quick as I may. I knew not what welcome he'd give, or if he'd answers to the questions burning inside me. *What am I?* Why *am I? Am I damned, as the old tales said? And if so, is there some way I might find salvation?*

"'But he'd struck me as a princely sort, and so I slipped over high walls and into shadows of the noble quarter. Though the Forever King was still a distant fear back then, he was a fear nonetheless, and patrols trudged through the freezing streets. I saw signs on almost every house—churlsilver or salt at the windows, braids of virgin's hair or withered garlic cloves or the wheel of the Redeemer above every door. Despite its beauty, dread hung over San Yves's snow-clad cobbles, coiling in its gloom.

"'But stealing through those palatial streets, I heard the most beautiful sound. It kissed the wind like perfume, like a lover calling their beloved home. To name it music was to name the Eversea a puddle, but that was the only word I had for what I heard.

"'Music, the like of which I'd never known.

"'Entranced, I followed, through the noble quarter to the grandest estate I'd seen in the city. The high wall bristled with spear tips, but my palms weren't scratched as I slipped over. My senses were sharp as razors since I'd fallen to darkness, and each note of that song was a spell, woven of gossamer and angel's tears.

"'It was a *hymn,* I realized. A favorite of my childhood, sung in our tiny chapel in Lorson with my mama and papa and sister and brother by my side.

"'*To Thee, My Heart.*

"'Despite the chill, a bay door at the upper floor was open, and it was from that balcony the hymn spilled into the night. I've no clue how long I stood beneath, enraptured. The player was a lone pianist, notes of their song dancing like fireflies in my dark. Reaching up, I found my cheeks wet with bloody tears—a horror to which I'd never grown accustomed. The light spilling from those doors seemed suddenly distant, the dark around me bottomless. But that music was like a lifeline thrown to a drowner, bidding her *Hold on, swim, strive*. With life came hope, it promised, and with hope, life.

"'The song ceased. The spell broke. I found myself in a barren garden, leafless trees about me and cooling gore upon my cheeks. I heard footsteps—

the musician, I realized, coming out to breathe night's air. And though I knew I should be gone, I could not help but linger, to see the one who'd woven such sorcery with a few simple keys.

"'It was a boy. Twelve or thirteen years old. He wore a crimson jacket and silken shirt, cravat pinned with a gleaming ruby—noble's garb. His hair was long and loosed, golden blond, his skin fair and features fine, but something struck me odd. It took a moment to grasp it. But as he stood with face upturned to heaven, the wind brushed back those golden locks from eyes white and sightless. And I knew then; this young maestro was blind as a newborn pup.

"'I turned to leave, boots crunching in the snow. He tilted his head, smiling down into the dark. *Bonsoir, Capitaine Lebeau. How fare you?*

"'I said nothing, frozen still.

"'*… Capitaine Lebeau?*

"'I bolted, a startled deer, up and over the wall. I hit the icy cobbles running, heard the boy cry out, a bell ringing in alarm, distant shouting and soldiers' boots. Cursing myself a fool, I dashed away, not stopping until I'd lost myself in the backstreets and squeezeways in the city's sprawling downside. And there I stopped, sinking against an alley wall, not breathless, but still afeared, searching the shadows with quickened eyes.

"'Dawn was coming. I needed a place to lay my head, a refuge from which to begin what I realized might be an impossible search. I'd been a peasant girl, remember. I'd never seen a city like San Yves, so many buildings, so many *people*. I began to understand the enormity of my task—I'd no clue where Wulfric might be found. And this was no muddy backwater, but a cityfort of soldiers. I must tread careful, lest I meet another ending.

"'I'd not many lives left.

"'*Will you help me, mademoiselle?*

"'I started at the voice, rising to my feet. In the alleymouth, I saw a silhouette against the misty light, shadow stretching toward me. I'd been so lost in thought, I'd not heard him approach; he must've been quiet as cats. I was halfway to bolting when I realized it was no soldier, not even a man, but another little boy; this one no more than four or five years old.

"'*I've lost Mama,* he said, hand to quivering lip. *Please help.*

"'Soft with pity, I tightened my scarf about my face lest I frighten him. Though it was every kind of strange to find a lone waif in that alley, I was overwhelmed with the urge to help, *help* this lost child find his mama. But as he stepped closer, I saw he was no waif at all.

"'He wore cloth of finest cut—a gorgeous frockcoat, knee-high hose and polished shoes, red silk and black velvet. Though barely more than a toddler, he was dressed in the manner of a lord, as if a tailor had taken a gentleman's clothes and shrunk them to fit his tiny frame. His dark hair was slicked back, and looking at his skin, poreless and pale, his eyes, gleaming sharp despite the tremble in his voice, I knew he was a monster.

"'A monster like me.

"'*Now, Aleks,* he whispered.

"'Something struck me, anvil-heavy and iron-hard. I'd been hit from above, a massive weight *smashing* me into the ground. I felt a boot between my shoulders, a fist crashing into my skull, once, twice, three times. Bone splintered, my face mashed into cobbles, and I hissed in pain as I was flipped onto my back.

"'My assailant stood above me, knuckles glazed with my blood. She was tall and heavy boned, perhaps middle-thirty. What little I could see of her hair was strawberry blond, her pupils glass-bottle green. But the whites of her eyes were shot with red, sunk in bruised hollows—a Dead thing's eyes. Her skin was mottled, run through with dark veins, like a corpse too long in its grave. But strangest of all, as she seized hold of my face, I realized she wore a long black habit, a veiled white wimple.

"'This monster was dressed as a *nun*.

"'Her grip was terrifying, my bones creaking. I was ripped off the cobbles like a plaything and smashed back into them, again, *AGAIN,* so hard the stone shattered, the back of my skull with it, my hood soaked with blood and brains. I was only dimly aware as the woman dropped me bloodied and broken onto the stone, tearing my scarf away.

"'*Uglygirl,* she gurgled, as if her throat was filled with phlegm. *Drink?*

"'The boy spoke in a crisp Elidaeni accent. *No, Aleks. You know the commandments.*

"'*Thirsty!* she snarled. *Drink!*

"'*No! Do you wish to make Master angry?*

"'The woman's fury abated at the boy's raised voice, and she shrunk down on herself as if *she* were the child being scolded. *Nono, nononono.*

"'*Then behave. Or I shall tell him you were wicked.*

"'*Nnnnono, Percival.* She patted my bleeding head so hard my eyeballs bulged in their broken sockets. *Good Aleks. Good me, see.*

"'I sucked a bubbling breath, trying to speak with my mangled mouth. *P-please—*

"'The little one blinked, looking me over with dark eyes. *Still moving, eh? Most impressive, mademoiselle. You must be born of sternest stock.*

"'*Voss.* The big woman sniffed her bloody hand and grinned razors. *Vossssss.*

"'*I s-seek—*

"'*Death? Wonderful.* Twirling a feathered tricorn between his hands, the Dead boy placed it upon his head. *Aleks, be a dear, will you?*

"'*No,* I gurgled, struggling upright. *N—*

"'The woman's hand closed about my forehead. I scrabbled at her grip, terror in my belly that after all I'd suffered, this might truly be the end of my road. But her strength was implacable as she hauled me off the stone and smashed my skull back into it.

"'*One.*

"'*Two.*

"'*Three.*

"'And like a curtain at concerto's end, darkness fell.

"'I was not even conscious as they carried me through the backstreets and over snow-clad cobbles. Had I been, I'd have understood why that moldy hulk named Aleks was dressed as a nun. For it was to the priory they took me; those grand gothic spires rising on the city's edge. I was dimly aware of being carried through dark tunnels beneath, slung over Aleks's shoulder as little Percival led the way. And finally, we emerged into a labyrinth of rooms and corridors deep below the priory's foundations.

"'I was slammed onto an oaken table, timbers shuddering. Looking about through bloody eyes, I saw a vast library, dimly lit by a chandelier above. The shelves stretched floor to ceiling, filled to bursting—as if every word ever penned beneath heaven must be there gathered. The carpets were blood-red, the timbers polished oak, air heavy with dust.

"'*Guard her well, Aleks. I shall fetch Master.*

"'*Aye, Percival.*

"'The little one raised his finger again in warning. *Be good.*

"'The big woman lowered her eyes. *Aye, Percival.*

"'He spun on polished heels, whisked out the door. I could feel his words echoing upon my skin—I'd later learn little Percival was of Ilon blood, and he used his gifts to keep his rot-witted comrade in check. But though she seemed cowed, I could see that great hulk glancing every so often to my neck. I knew not where I was, nor what these two were about, but I knew *hunger* when I saw it. And when Aleks lifted one massive paw, dipping it into my ruined throat and slipping red fingers into her mouth, I broke for the terror of it.

"'I lashed out with one foot, catching her belly. She buckled as I rolled off the table, dashing for the doorway, but she was on me in an instant, crashing atop me with ungodly strength and smashing me face-first into the floor.

"'*Uglygirl! Badgirl!*

"'Again and again she pounded me into the ground, staining the carpet a deeper red. I was left broken, skull split, unable to move. But I was aware of Aleks atop me now, knee to the back of my head, once more lifting her hand and licking my blood off her fingers. And looking about, sly despite the dull, dead glint in her eyes, she smiled.

"'*Thirsty …*

"'I gasped, trying to scream with my mangled throat, trying to fight with my broken hands as Aleks plunged her fangs into the join between my shoulder and neck. I'll admit the first sensation was bliss; that ecstasy of which maids whisper and minstrels sing. But within blood-slick, shivering moments, my bliss was consumed by agony.

"'She wasn't stopping, I realized. My veins catching fire as the unlife was torn from them, flooding into that monster's gullet. She drank greedily, paws crushing me into the stone, pain swallowing me whole. I was going to die, I knew it—with all the dreadful certainty of the sheep as the wolf circles. But I was too broken to fight, barely able to wheeze; a final, bubbling defiance of death spat with all the heat of a faint summer breeze.

"'*N-no …*

"'Aleks was ripped off my back, slung across the room. Crying out as she slammed into the wall, the big woman crumpled to the floor. She rose swift, fangs bared, but her snarl died as she saw who'd struck her, looming over me now with fists clenched.

"'*Master,* Aleks whispered, pressing her brow to the floor.

"'It was *him.* After all the bloody miles, two years after I'd set out to find him, six lives spent, there he was. My brother's father. My mother's lover. *Lord Wulfric*. Tall as mountains and pale as snow, hair spilling over his shoulders in curtains dark as ink. The black cat he'd come to Lorson with—the same one I'd threatened that night with my dagger—sat beside him, blood-red glower fixed on me. But when we'd first met, all those years ago, Wulfric's eyes had been the grey of stormwashed skies, same as my brother's. As he looked down at me, I saw his gaze was now black as night itself, glinting with the faintest hint of …

"'*I know thee,* he said.

"'I could give no reply, broken and senseless. His eyes roamed the wreckage of my face, skinless ropes of muscle and gore-flecked bone. And gentle as the first breath of spring, I felt his thoughts touch mine, so calm and cool I near forgot I'd been but a breath from death.

"'*Celene Castia?*

"'*Oui …*

"'*Merciful God in heaven, child … how comes it thou art here?*

"'I told him then. Told him all, mind to mind. It had been years since I'd spoken to anyone really, and my *God,* I was so grateful to simply be *heard* again I found myself weeping. He listened to my tale, silent as stone, little Percival and big Aleks watching from the shadows. I saw pain in his eyes—boundless, bleeding pain—when I told him of my mama's death. A single tear of blood spilled down his cheek, its scent so dizzying, so *potent,* I almost forgot my place. But I told him of my trials, of my deaths, of all I had suffered just to reach his side. And I clutched his hand then, eyes boring into his, asking the question that had plagued me every night since I'd risen. I was a child of provincial superstition after all. Holy ground was barred me, running water burned me, but I'd lived the life of a faithful daughter of the Almighty, and surely, he'd not abandoned me in death.

"'*Am I damned?*

"'I squeezed, blood in my lashes, ruined lips trying to form the words.

"'*A-am I?*

"'He held my gaze, as if weighing me on some hidden scale. The daughter of his old paramour. The sister of his bastard son. A hundred seasons of the earth seemed to dawn and wither between us, air swelling with winter chill as he finally hung his head.

"'*Damned thou art. And we beside thee. Our flesh accursed and our souls hellbound.*

"'I closed my eyes then. The last breath of hope dying inside me. But I felt his hand, gentle as a father's, reaching out to encircle my own.

"'*But there is hope, Petit Monstre. Even in this darkness, with black light it burns.*

"'He pressed my hands together, like a penitent. And he spoke, thoughts echoing in my head as if my skull were some great and empty cathedral, filled now with prayer.

"'*O Lord of Love, O God of Blood,*
"'*O King of Wolf and Lamb,*
"'*Thy will be done,*
"'*Thy judgment comes,*
"'*Alike to bless'd and damned.*
"'*Though Dead, by thy word I yet live,*
"'*Though cursed, by thy will I now rise,*
"'*Bonds earthly I sever, thy servant forever.*
"'*And evil I do, lest evil I be,*
"'*No more than the monster ye made me.*

"'I met those black eyes, fervor flooding into my cold, Dead chest. I'd been raised godly, and Wulfric's words filled me with the same fire I'd once felt in our chapel back in Lorson. It *was* a prayer he spoke, I realized. Yet not a prayer for mortal men, spoken with living tongues on holy ground by those to whom heaven was promised.

"'It was a prayer for the likes of *us*.

"'*The Vow, we call it,* he told me. *The Vow Esana.*

"'*Master?*

"'Wulfric looked up, the little one named Percival watching with knife-bright eyes.

"'*May I have this one? I have never taken communion with one born of Voss. I would be honored to carry her to—*

"'*Noooo,* Aleks growled. My *turn.*

"'*Your* turn? *You lack-witted clot-bucket, it was* I *who found her—*

"'*My turn!* Aleks thumped her breast. *You pretty aready, Percival. Not rotten,* *not reeking. Better get, when we drink, we want be l—*

"'*ENOUGH.*

"'Wulfric's voice snapped like a whip, and both vampires fell silent. He'd seemed a kindly soul as he listened to my tale, gentle thoughts bidding me speak, gentle tears spilling down his face. But he stood now, that devil-black cat weaving among his ankles, and a chill uncoiled in my belly as I saw a terrible wrath in him unveiled. As they shrank before him, I realized it was not through love that this strange pair were bound to his service.

"'They were *terrified* of him.

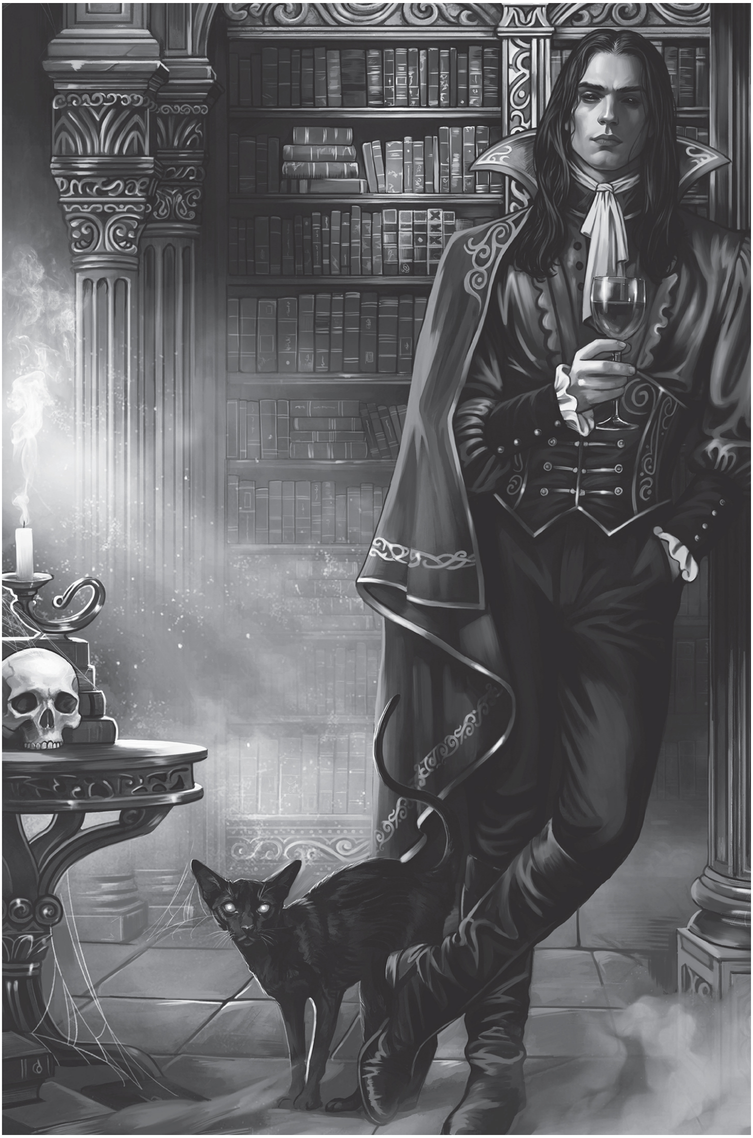
"'*God hath given us a gift this night,* he declared. *A wand'ring lamb hath found her shepherd, and we shall not scorn divine providence. Celene abides with us now. I will show her the footsteps our Founder gave us. The path to her salvation. And should she prove worthy—her mother's daughter—she will one night lay claim to the same title ye both bear.*

"'All my thoughts were atumble—fear and awe, gratitude and curiosity—but it was fervor that finally won me over as Wulfric offered his hand.

"'*Liathe.*'

"I fell silent, waves crashing against the hull, *Dawnseeker* rocking me back and forth like a babe in a father's arms. I glanced to the porthole, that reflection of our little sanctuary in the hold. But in the shadows, I saw a deeper shadow then, moving like a shark, his whisper so near and clear I swore I felt his cold breath upon our ear.

"*I should have killed thee then and there.*



“The Grail drew on her cigarelle, pale blue eyes on mine as she exhaled a perfect ring of grey. I’d noted she always smoked with her wounded hand—rather than be ashamed of her injury, she called attention to it. My own hands adjusted my scarf, wrapping it tighter around my face. A long slice of silence filled the space between us, broken only by the swell and the faint call of watchmen that all was well.

“‘Merci, Celene.’

“‘… For what?’

"'Sharing with me. Training me. I think I might've gone insane cooped up on this boat without you. So merci. For … everything.'

"'You are welcome. Mon amie.'

"'One question, though.'

"'Ask.'

"'You said the wounds Laure left you with were so bad you could barely speak. But now, you speak just fine. I saw your face unveiled when we fought Kiara on the Mère. It's no oil painting to be sure, but nowhere near as terrible as you say it used to be.'

"'No.'

"'There's a story there you're not telling me.'

"The whispering choir rose unbidden in my head; all those voices, all those lives, a symphony of bloodshed and brutality. But beneath, like faint angels in the heavens, I heard the dulcet notes of a sonata. Drifting upon wintersdeep winds, pale fingers pressed upon ivory keys, upon marbled cheeks, the ache in me so real, so deep, that for a moment, I wished I'd not burned through eight of my lives, but nine.

"'A story. But one that is *earned,* chérie. Your blood can slice twine, oui. But we doubt your enemies will be so kind as to stand still, waiting for you to cut them in half.'

"'Hope springs eternal.'

"'One does not achieve victory by hoping, Dior.'

"Nodding, she stubbed her cigarelle out against the post. 'You're right. Fuck hope.'

"Cracking her knuckles, she turned her eyes back to her bloody teacup.

"'Let's work.'"

IX

GOD’S OWN MONSTER

“‘OUT OF MORBID curiosity, how long did it take you to master this?’ Dior panted.

“‘I’d not call myself a master, Dior.’

“She scowled, clawing sweat-damp hair from her lips. ‘You know, when I ran with those pickpockets in Lashaame, one of the older snipes told me to always carry myself in the street with a bit of swagger. *Life tends to knock the stuffing out of you,* he said. *So it’s best to act like you were born with more than your fair share.*’

“‘Your point being?’

“‘I was never a fan of modesty, Castia. Especially not the false sort.’

“We were down in the bilge-dank hold as always, midnight bells long faded, ocean song crashing all about us. Dior was taking a breather, cheeks pinked from exertion, pulse pounding. We sat opposite, a bloodstained wooden training sword in hand.

“We’d been trying for weeks to forge her budding skills into something practical—to combine the sword-forms she’d learned from Reyne and my brother with the sanguimancy we’d taught. But for all her alleged swagger, the Grail seemed unable to concentrate on the blood and her swordplay simultaneously. Despite her determination, her mind seemed … unquiet. Her ribs were bruised from our wooden blade, knuckles blue and bloodied, and she’d finally collapsed into an exasperated puddle of rage.

“‘If you wish to see a master sanguimancer at work,’ we told her, ‘wait until you see Mother Maryn unleashed.'

"'That feels like a long wait for a ship never coming,' Dior scowled. 'No offense to your Priori, but she's spent this whole trip locked in her cabin. She's not found hide nor hair of Gabe, despite promising to not rest until she did. But all she *does* is fucking rest.'

"'A century is a long time to sleep, Dior. Maryn searches for Gabriel as best she is able. But the empire is vast. That mote of herself she sent on the wing will not endure forever. And though we appreciate the gifts of your soldiers each night, we are both…' We swallowed then, hand to belly. '… *very* thirsty.'

"She chewed her lip, as if debating whether to speak.

"'Does it bother you? That Maryn doesn't even know how daysdeath began? I mean, all we're doing is meant to part the veil, oui? We don't even know how it started.'

"'But we know how it ends, chérie. *You.*'

"'Well, I hope Maryn shakes off her nightdress soon. Capitaine á Connell says we're but a few weeks from Augustin. And fuck knows what's waiting for us there.'

"'Mother Maryn will be ready. Have faith, mon amie.'

"Dior looked us over, propping one of her last cigarelles on her lips. 'You look ridiculous, by the by. How am I supposed to concentrate with you dressed like that?'

"We patted the sailor's slicks we were clad in, head to foot. 'I know a wise woman once said there are always fucks to give for fashion. But your blood sets fire to any Dead flesh it touches, Dior. Oilskins seemed a more prudent choice than haute couture.'

"She scoffed, rising to her feet and pacing like a caged beast. 'Seriously. How long did it take to get good?'

"'It is different for us.'

"I pricked our finger with my thumbnail, holding it aloft. Our veins were parched, the blood we were rationed every eve barely enough to check our thirst—God only knew what it was like for Maryn. But still, we willed a tiny drop from the wound, up and into the air. It hovered, spinning, glittering like a red diamond between Dior and us.

"'Wulfric's soul abides within this shell. And his knowledge and power are in part ours now. We did not learn so much as … recall.'

"She stopped pacing, curiosity lighting her eyes. 'So you know everything *they* knew? All the vampires you've drank? All the souls you carry?'

"'In a sense. But it is … complicated, Dior. There are many of them now, and it is sometimes difficult to tell where they end and I begin. I know the words to songs I have never heard. Remember places I have never been. The tomes of their knowledge sit upon my shelves, if you will. But the covers are untitled. And I often find them locked.'

"'What about Aléne Voss?'

"We blinked, gaze sharpening. 'What about her?'

"'Well, you've got one of the seven Princes of Forever in your library. Can't you crack her open, see what her father's plan is? What *exactly* Fabién wants with me?'

"I peered within us then; to that dark and bloody corner where the Terror dwelled. Seething. Roiling. God, such hellborn *rage* …

"'I think not. Even in death, Aléne is *very* powerful, Dior. There are places in my mind where even I fear to tread now.'

"The Grail shook her head, exhaling grey as she searched my eyes.

"'Hell of a thing. What you Esana put yourself through.'

"'The path of the believer is seldom easy. In my bones, I *know* the teachings of Illia to be true. The Day of Judging promised in the Testaments will come. The Faithful will be gathered up by his hand. On that day, all souls under heaven will be weighed, and hell is exactly the fate we hope to save them from. But faith is no guarantee of happiness. And this road is made to test us. So the question in the end is simple.'

"We pressed our hand to our heart then, silent and empty.

"'What are you prepared to sacrifice for what you believe?'

"She chewed her lip, nodding slow. This girl had sacrificed a great deal, after all.

"'Must've been hard to swallow, though. When Wulfric laid all this on you.'

"'I did not need to swallow *anything* at first.' I scoffed. 'Save the rats I hunted through the priory's bowels. Little Percival mocked me for my appetites. Aleks called me *Sillygirl*. Even Wulfric's cat—that little black devil named Grace—looked at me as if I were beneath her. She never forgave me that night I threatened her with my knife, you know. If I left my boots unattended for more than an hour, the cur would leave a gift of fresh scat in each. But I'd vowed I'd not become a monster, and to that I held.

"'For a while at least.

"'But even had I *wished* to hunt mortal prey, I'd not have been able to. The first seasons beneath Wulfric's wing, he did not allow me to leave the priory. He taught me little of the Faith at first, save there *was* one. He talked of God. Of theology and Testaments. He conducted a strange, blood-soaked version of the mass I'd been raised with every prièdi. Sometimes I heard him in the library—meeting with sharp-eyed men in travel-stained leathers, speaking of holy portents, bidding them search for sacred signs. I know now they were looking for *you,* Dior. For omens the Redeemer's line endured. But when I asked back then, Wulfric told me nothing. No, in those early years my master educated me only in what I was. Accursed by heaven and damned by God. *Moroi. Maebh'lair. Tötelebb. Vampyr*.

"'*But even the monstrous serve divine purpose,* he told me one night. *For all* *on earth below and heaven above is the work of his hand.*

"'*And all the work of his hand is in accord with his plan,* I replied.

"'*Véris, Petit Monstre,* he said, patting my shoulder. *Véris.*

"'We were strolling together, along a grand boulevard in the noble quarter. This was my reward for *four years* of faithful service—to be finally allowed to walk in San Yves at my master's side. I admit, I was trembling with excitement at being out in those wondrous streets again. The City of Spears was a beauty I'd only observed from afar; heard but not seen, smelled but not touched. The Forever King had crossed the Bay of Tears by then, Nordlund and Ossway consumed by war, my brother's legend full grown. But aside from a steady influx of refugees, San Yves was yet unscarred, and I thought it a gift to walk in her at last. A blessing for which I was truly grateful. It never occurred to me that the only reason I'd been denied her splendor for so long was because *he* had denied it to me.

"'Wulfric was attired like a nobleborn seigneur: fine greatcoat, cane, and tricorn, dipped politely to the mademoiselles passing us by. I was dressed as a dutiful daughter, out with Papa on a late stroll through the Quartier des Théâtres. Like any responsible parent, Wulfric had wrapped his "child" in a thick coat and scarf to spare her the chill. But even with my wounds hidden, it was still a task to pass as human. I'd been working for years at teaching my mangled tongue and jaw to fashion words again. Speaking slow and careful as we passed a grand fountain of San Antoine, and down the beautiful Rue des Saints.

"'*What then is our purpose, Master?*

"'*We wait,* Wulfric replied. *We watch.*

"'*For what?*

"'*That knowledge is earned, child. Through faithful service to God.*

"'*But how do we serve, if we are accursed by him? How do the wicked do his will?*

"'*By punishing those more wicked still.*

"'We stopped. Standing now outside a grand estate. The house was magnificent, its high fence woven of iron spikes. The gate was locked, but Wulfric reached out with gentle hand, and the metal gave way. Pushing the gates aside, he stepped beyond. I glanced about; quiet midnight streets, lonely winter winds. And with no small trepidation, I joined him.

"'*Who lives here?* I asked.

"'*A priest named Beaufoy. New appointed to San Yves by Pontifex Benét. We hath been watching him these past months. He hath proved a man of … meagre faith.*

"'I glanced to the estate house, faint light burning in the windows.

"'*Why are we here, Master?*

"'*To serve God's will.*

"'I looked at him, uncertain, fire now rising in his midnight eyes.

"'*Do ye remember the Vow? Evil I do, lest evil I be?*

"'*No more than the monster he made me.*

"'I blinked, looking once more at that grand estate. I could see a figure now, moving behind the curtains. My skin crawling with goosebumps. This was the home of a holy man. A servant of God, anointed by his Pontifex, his hand upon this earth.

"'*You wish me to …*

"'*It is the Almighty's will for the wolf to cull the sickened calf. And it is sin, to allow sin to go unanswered. Thou hast skulked in the dark feasting upon rats long enough. Thou art God's own monster tonight, Celene. Embrace what* he *made thee.*

"'Dread filled me at those words. The anguished screams of my first kill still rang in my head if I listened hard enough, and my vow to never drink the blood of mortals had held more than six years. But it must be impressed how in *awe* of Wulfric I was in those nights. He was beautiful. Magikal. He held the wisdom of centuries. The power of gods. And it made me feel special that he'd taken me into his home. I'd no famille to turn to, save the brother I hated. But Wulfric had turned his back on Gabriel too. Instead, he'd chosen *me*. And in the end, there were no others on earth I knew like us.

"'Without Wulfric … I had nothing.

"'*But … this is his home. How will I get inside?*

"'*Knock.*

"'And so I did. Standing on the threshold, knuckles soft upon the wood. I heard approaching footsteps, looking back to where my master stood. But Wulfric was gone, vanished into the mist as the door opened wide.

"'*Good God, child, what are you doing here?*

"'I looked up into the eyes of a youngish man, middle-thirty. His face was kindly, concern bright in baby-blue eyes. He was handsome—possessed of the same rugged charm the mademoiselles we passed in the streets found so appealing in my master. In truth, he looked no kind of evil at all.

"'*Are you well? What is wrong, chérie?*

"'I bowed my head, face hidden behind my scarf, my voice a wounded whisper.

"'*I'm lost.*

"'*Oh, poor love. Come in, lest you catch your death.*

"'I did as he bid, invited across the threshold and into his home, simple as that. He glanced about the yard, the street beyond, frowning at the gate he'd thought locked. But seeing no soul nor sign, he shut his door swiftly, locking it afterward. Smiling, he led me down a long corridor to a reading room, and there he bid me sit, please sit. Speaking over his shoulder as he set a fire in the hearth.

"'*Where are you from, chérie?*

"'I replied softly, carefully forming the word with my ruined mouth.

Lorson.

"'He blinked. *I'd heard Lorson was burned. Years back. Where are your parents?*

"'I stayed silent, shaking my head in answer, fingers twitching in my lap.

"'*An orphan. Oh, poor kinless lamb, have you nowhere to stay? No friends here?*

"'I shook my head again. And I thought it a trick of the light, but it seemed a gleam came over his eyes then. A gleam that in years following, I'd come to know all too well.

"'*Our Church runs a foundling shelter,* he told me. *One of the first initiatives I spearheaded when I moved here. These awful troubles abroad … so many innocent victims. I can speak to the Sisters of the Faith, if you wish? Would you like that? A place to live?*

"'He smiled as I nodded, blue eyes gone sharp as broken glass.

"'*Good, good. Perhaps you might do me a kindness in turn one night.*

"'I only stared, fingers fallen still.

"'*Will you not take off your scarf?*

"'His smile dimmed as I shook my head. But it was soon renewed, Beaufoy rising now to his feet. *You're cold, of course. I shall fix us a hot drink. What say you to some tea, eh? There's not much left, but I've a special store for pretty lost lambs.*

"'He swept from the room with another smile, yet I heard the lock click as he departed. I looked to the window, snow falling in the night outside, and in the lee of a frozen elm, I saw Wulfric, darker than the shadows he stood in. His eyes were pitiless, and in my mind I heard his thoughts, tolling like funeral bells.

"'*God's own monster.*

"'Beaufoy returned, teapot on a wooden platter. But rather than sitting near the fire, he sat beside me on the chaise longue, handing me a steaming cup. The long-forgot scent washed over me—memories of my mama seated at the kitchen table, Gabriel and Amélie and I playing knucklebones. But beneath that sickly wash of nostalgia, my senses caught another perfume, just as noxious. The same that the elderwives in Lorson would brew for new mothers after a particularly hard-won birth.

"'Whitepoppy.

"'I glanced to the window then, that shadow speaking in my head.

"'*As I said. A man of meagre faith.*

"'*You cannot drink wearing that scarf.*

"'I looked to Beaufoy as he spoke, his smile just a touch too wide.

"'*Come, let's be rid of it, chérie.*

"'The priest reached for the cloth about my face. But I shied away, shaking my head.

"'*Don't be shy. You've such pretty, peculiar eyes. I'm sure the rest of you is just* *as fair. And it would be rude to refuse a brew fine as this. Real tea is rare these nights.*

"'*I'm cold,* I whispered.

"'I saw a flash of pique, quickly hidden behind another smile. And setting aside his cup, Beaufoy busied himself with the fire. With the speed of the Dead, I lifted the top of the teapot and poured my brew back inside. Eyes drifting to that shadow beyond the window.

"'*He prefers them younger than thee,* Wulfric's thoughts whispered. *Plucks them from the Foundling Shelter he created, whisking them away with promises of a bright future. He buries them in the old cemetery out back afterward. One rots in his cellar right now.*

"'I inhaled then, catching the faint reek of death as Wulfric pressed.

"'*No more rats, Celene. Time for thee to begin killing* true *vermin.*

"'*Oh, you've finished?*

"'I turned to find Père Beaufoy sitting beside me again.

"'*Poor child, you must've been thirsty. Are you still…?* He reached out, placing his hand gentle on mine. *Good heavens, you're as cold as the grave.*

"'The priest was smiling again, wolf's teeth and hunter's eye, searching for signs of his poison gone to work. I wondered how many he had murdered. If he could remember their names. Hunger roiled within me—a thirst never *truly* sated upon rats or rabbits—and I found myself wondering how evil tasted. But still I determined not to embrace it. Refusing to become like the monster who had destroyed me.

"'And then he put his hand on my thigh.

"'Sliding higher.

"'*Between.*

"'Though I could see no reflection in the priest's pupils, I knew what he beheld as I dragged my scarf away. And then I was on him, astride him, teeth sinking deep into his neck. I was a stranger to these sensations—the press of his body against mine, his skin beneath my mouth, the bottomless rush as my fangs pierced flesh. But I was drinking then, diving inside and swallowing him whole, rushing, drowning, boiling.

"'His hand grasped mine and he gasped, shivering. I realized he was *enjoying* it—the Kiss's euphoria taking hold. But I'd no desire for this bastard's last moments to be blissful, so I bit harder, his bones grinding in my grip, flesh tearing in my teeth. Beaufoy roared then, elation torn to ribbons as I savaged his throat, making it hurt, *hurt* just as *he* had hurt *them.*

"'And in agony, in sweet and holy fear, that maggot died screaming.

"'I lifted my mouth from his wreckage, elation like I'd never known flooding through me, hot, thick, pulsing. Gore dripping from my teeth as I whispered.

"'*Evil I do. Lest evil I be.*

"'Rising to my feet, I turned toward the window. I could see Wulfric there framed, watching with midnight eyes, smiling with bloodless lips.

"'*No more than the monster he made ye*.

"'We buried Beaufoy with his other victims, in the cemetery behind his estate. It was old and overgrown—little more than a small crypt and a few tombstones. There were none left alive to remember those buried there, and the snows soon covered all evidence of our crime. Wulfric said a prayer when we were done—not for the sinner, but those innocents beside him—and past the elation of my kill, I found myself looking upon my master with new admiration. He was a creature of centuries, Wulfric. A monster of legend. And still he found it within him to grieve over a passel of murdered girls.

"'Together, we headed home, up the great, snow-clad Rue de la Montagne, Wulfric close at my side. He was a creature of many moods, my master. One moment cold and cruel, the next, warm as mulled wine. I knew not why at the time; how the hundreds of souls within him tore his mind this way and that. But though he spoke no word to interrupt the dark thrill in my breast that night, I could feel he was pleased with me.

"'This had been a test, I realized. And I had not fallen.

"'I had *flown*.

"'And then I heard it.

"'Music—as if that word could encompass it. Sweet and blessed *music,* lifting me up just as it had done years ago. It drifted across snow-clad cobbles, hung in the night like sweetest smoke, and Wulfric too seemed caught in its spell. We both set tread toward it, finally stopping outside a ring of high walls. The estate was not much changed from four years back; tall towers and snow-clad garden, shrouded in candlelit mist.

"'*Château Durand,* Wulfric explained. *First house of San Yves. Its patriarchs hath ruled this city longer than I hath dwelled here.*

"'I looked through the iron bars and across the grounds. A small soiree was being held by the look: the curtains drawn back, a humble gathering of well-frocked mesdames and well-heeled messieurs in a large sitting room. And at its heart, I saw *him,* seated at a grand piano. Blind eyes upturned as he wove his spell upon the keys.

"'When last I'd seen him, he was but a child. But now, he'd bloomed into a young man, fine and strong. His jaw was sharp, his cheekbones sharper, long blond hair framing a face that might've haunted my dreams if only I had them.

"'*Laurent. The elderson.* Wulfric sighed, entranced by that song. *A shame about his affliction. Yet who canst say if he would play as well if the Almighty had not taken his sight?*

"'*He's …* I stared, hands wrapped about cold iron bars. *Beautiful.*

"Wulfric looked at me, and where a moment before, his eyes were softened by Laurent's spell, now they were cold. *Have a care, Petit Monstre.*

We live among mortals, but ever apart from them. Though nights are different now, still we dwell in secret, and still we are vulnerable where we sleep. To truck with the living is foolhardy. Dangerous.

"'*So we can have no ties to this world at all?*

"'*Bonds earthly we sever, his servants forever. A greater calling hath we, Celene. Ye learned part of it tonight. And to it, to* Him, *we must be faithful.* Wulfric's gaze roamed those folk, gathered in candlelight and song. *They are not our kind.*

"'*Is that what you told my mama?*

"'I looked up at him then, jaw clenched tight.

"'*She was of like enough kind for you to have seeded my brother in her.*

"'Leaden silence fell between us, and in his eyes I saw not just simple coldness now, but *terrible* rage. You might think it foolish for me to have talked so. But I was young, remember; barely fifteen years alive and only a handful of years Dead. And defiance is ever the province of a child who refuses to think of herself as one.

"'*Be that the reason ye suppose I took thee in?* he asked, voice gone dark. *Some sense of guilt over thy mama's fate? Some desire to amend past sin?*

"'*I do not know why you took me in, Master. But I am grateful for it.*

"'*Grateful? This spit in my face, thou wouldst name gratitude?*

"'Wulfric's hand rose, and I half expected it to fall on me. I'd grown up around violence, remember; my papa's hand heavy on my brother's skin. But instead, Wulfric tore off my scarf, casting it onto the snow. I could feel the night air playing on muscle and tendon, licking at the gore-slick rope of my tongue. I tried to pull away, but Wulfric stopped me; the strength in his arm and the wrath in his eyes.

"'*Let me tell thee why I took thee under my wing, Celene Castia.* He looked me over, lip curled. *Thine is a face only God could love. And so the love thou shalt bear* him *will burn with a brightness like no other. But thou art no liathe yet. Ye still hath* much *to learn.*

"'Wulfric glanced to the château, the figures within.

"'*Have a care, lest ye learn the hard way.*

"'He walked away, leaving me in the arms of that beautiful music, bloody tears welling on my lashes. I was wounded by his cruelty, ashamed as I snatched up my scarf. But more, as I looked through the château windows, I was cut by the truth in his words. That beautiful boy, that beautiful world; firelight warmth and smiling guests and slender fingers pressed like lover's lips to ivory and ebony … it could never be mine.

"'And turning my back on it, I followed my master home.'

"I fell silent, the deck of *Dawnseeker* swaying in the arms of the rolling waves. Dior was watching me through a haze of smoke, eyes narrowed against its sting.

"'I've said it once and I'll say it again. This Wulfric sounds a fucking *prick,* Celene.’

“*Tell her the rest.*

“The voice rang in my mind, so close I flinched, looking over my shoulder and almost expecting to find him there. But there was only that porthole glass, that shadow within.

“*Tell her the rest of it, Petit Monstre. Or shall ye lie to her, as ye lie to thine own self?*

“‘… Celene?’

“I met Dior’s eyes, nodding. ‘A prick. That he was.’

“She smiled, and I chuckled, and together, we set back to task; sword and blood and bruises. But while we worked, I could feel him moving in that reflection, looming once upon my horizon, but now, so close I could feel the cold breath on my ear as he whispered.

“*Liar.*”

X

THE DUTY OF THE DAMNED

“‘WE DID NOT speak for almost half a year after that.

“‘Wulfric was a creature of ever-changing mood, as I said. When he was of good cheer, it seemed the moons came out from behind the clouds. But a fate even worse than having him angry with you was to simply be overlooked, and so he did me, for nearly six months after I’d mentioned his affair with my mama. Instead, my master lavished attention upon his other servants, and left me in the cold. Not abused. Not berated. Simply ignored.

“‘Truth told, this suited my fellow acolytes just fine. Big dull Aleks was never cruel to me as such, but nor was she particularly enamored of my company back then. She called me *Uglygirl*—mostly because she couldn’t remember my name, I suspect—and treated me less like a comrade and more an amusing, if unattractive, housepet.

“‘She was a strange creature, to be sure. Aleks’s blood was Dyvok, and she was as frightening strong as any fledgling of her kin. But decomposition had damaged her brain before she Became, her intellect little more than a child’s. I’d asked Wulfric why he’d taken a creature so afflicted into his service, and he’d told me God loved all his children, that Aleks deserved a chance at salvation. I admired him for that. But in hindsight, I think it was not charity that drove my master to bring Aleks into the Faith. Truth is, Wulfric had a fondness for surrounding himself with hideous things, so he’d feel less hideous by contrast.

“‘Percival was a different fish entire. Sly and sharp as knives. He was younger than I when he Became. Six years spent living, and just two decades Dead. I thought we might find common ground in that—my own body trapped just shy of womanhood's shore. But Percival treated me like an interloper, a *competitor* for Wulfric's affections. He called me Rattrap, mocking me for my refusal to feast upon mortals when I'd first arrived. And though I'd now embraced the notion of being that which God made me, plunging face-first into the red river of murderers and rapists and thieves in San Yves, still he didn't let me forget. Squeaking like a mouse as I passed by and leaving dead vermin in my coffin as gifts.'"

"Coffin?"

The historian looked up from his tome, one brow raised.

"You slept in a *coffin*? What on earth for?"

The Last Liathe shrugged, dragging one fingernail along oil-slick stone. "A reminder from Wulfric. He'd cast us in the role of the righteous. Stalking the San Yves streets, hunting for the evil, the impious, the cruel and corrupt. It would've been easy to fall in love with the power we wielded and the terror we instilled, thinking ourselves chosen of God. But crawling into those rough pine boxes every dawn—no cushions, no comforts—we were left with no illusions as to what we were. Not blessed, but damned.

"'Yet even though Percival and I shared little kinship, I'd begun to glean there was *more* to all this—beyond the murder of evildoers, of God's retribution in us. Those travel-stained wanderers Wulfric trucked with. The way he searched the night sky as if it held some hidden secret. Percival dropped little crumbs to let me know *he* knew more than I; about some great war between vampires long past, some sacred trust of which we were *all* a part. But it was not until my master gathered us in his great library one wintersdeep eve I truly understood the scope of it. The terror and joy of it. For it was that eve he revealed the true purpose of the Esana, handed down from Illia to us. The promise in those words I'd heard him so often say, but never explain.

"'Judgment Comes.

"'*A great blow hath been dealt to the west,* he told us. *A great evil sent to dwell with the Fallen in hell. But Tolyev's brood have scattered in the wake of his fall, and three have washed up here in the City of Spears. Brought to salvation by God's own providence.*

"'*Three Dyvok.* Little Percival smiled then, mouth full of razors. *Near enough for all.*

"'Aleks grinned, Dead eyes alight. *Drink, Master?*

"'*Aye,* he said, smoothing back her hair. *Thou shalt drink. Reward for faithful service.*

"'She ran a hand over her moldered skin. *Aleks be better?*

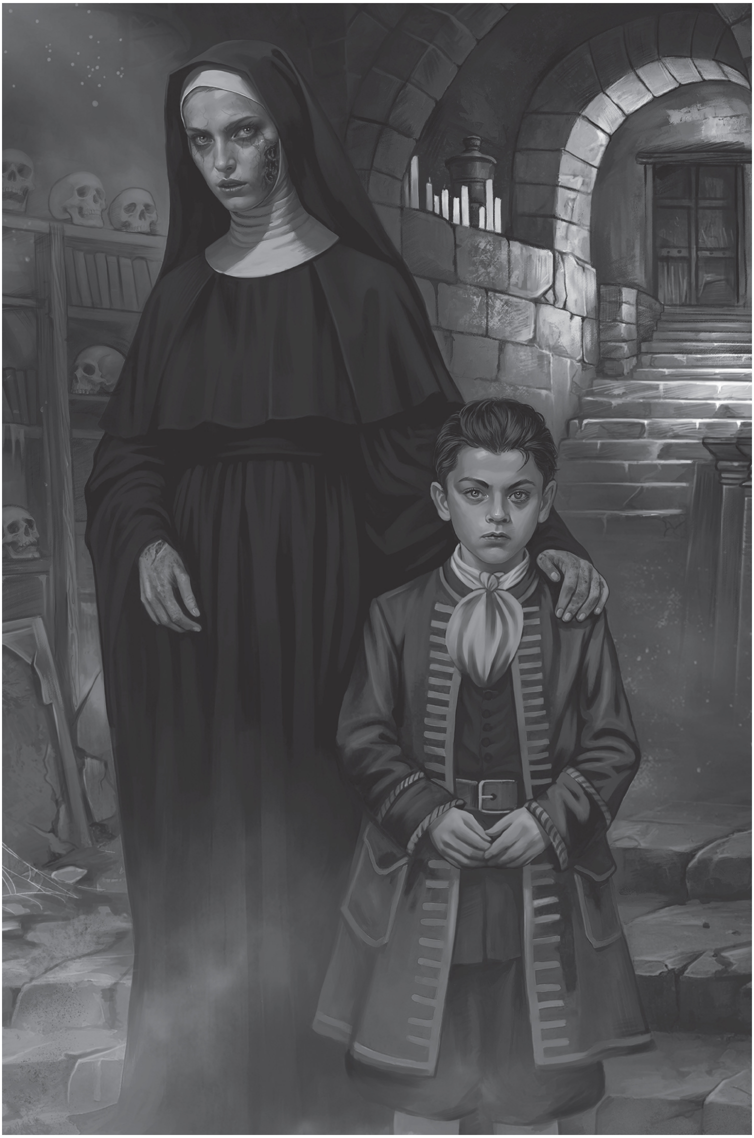
"'Wulfric nodded, but his face remained stern. *They seem young in the blood, my liathe. Hope not for much. But aye, if not whole, thou shalt at least be* *better*.

"'I frowned at that, not quite understanding his meaning. But Aleks turned me, unbridled joy in her eyes. *Uglygirl, too? Be better? Be pretty?*

"'*Nay*.

"'Wulfric fixed me with eyes cold as winter.

"'*Celene still hath much to learn*.



"'I bowed to his will, my gaze downturned. I played the role of dutiful servant as I'd done for months, hoping to regain his favor, to learn more of all this—what I was, and how my soul might be saved. But most, I avoided defying Wulfric for fear he might enter my mind, pry beyond my surface thoughts. For while I followed his teachings and repeated his prayers and called him *Master*, truth was, I'd been defying him for months.

"'*We are not their kind.*

"'I'd not meant to, I swear it. My intention to obey my master was pure. But returning from murdering a pair of fleshpeddlers with Percival and Aleks one eve, I'd heard it, drifting over the city skyline like perfume—that *music* again, digging like the sweetest hook into my flesh. I'd begged off my comrades' company and followed the sound, though my feet already knew the way. Iron to starstone. Fated to fate. And in the snow beneath his balcony, I'd stood again and listened to Laurent Durand play.

"'I wish I could describe it for you. But in truth I've neither words nor heart to. He played hymns mostly, and his music was a doorway from the blood-drenched nights in which I dwelled, back to an age of innocence. I was washed clean in it, borne beyond any earthly concern, any monstrous duty. Laurent's music was proof that even in a world dark as ours, beauty still shone the brighter. The miraculous happened every day. God had not turned his face from me.

"'From that night forth, I'd stolen out twice a week to hear him practice. Standing beneath his window, cheeks anointed by bloody tears. Some nights I'd wait until he was done, walking out to his balcony, blind eyes upturned to the heavens he praised. But most nights my heart simply wouldn't take it, and I'd flee like a thief before I had to look at him.

"'This was foolish, and I knew it.

"'More, I knew the risk I took, disobeying my master. And so I kept my visits secret, all thoughts of them hidden, following obediently as Wulfric swept out into the night now, Percival and Aleks beside him. The former was attired in his frockcoat and finery as always, but Aleks had left her nun's habit behind, dressed in leathers and a hooded cloak to cover her rot-mottled skin. I knew not what was to come, only that my fellow acolytes were near *euphoric,* Aleks scruffing my hair like a puppy, Percival even going so far as to smile at me.

"'The Dyvok were out on the hunt as we arrived at their lair—a storehouse once used for livestock, now cold and empty. Two thralled Ossian thugs stood guard outside the doors, slouching in the shadows of packing crates and pipe smoke.

"'*Have you seen my mama?*

"'The pair looked up as Percival approached, voice thick with tears.

"'*Please, messieurs, I've lost my mama …*

"'The larger thug scowled, growling for the "boy" to get gone. But the second—a rougher, crueler-looking gent—told his fellow to calm himself, approaching the lost waif with a smile. *Mistress likes the little ones, mayhaps she—*

"'He got no further, neck snapped clean in Percival's little hands. Aleks slipped from the shadows, rising up behind the second thug and breaking his spine before he could cry out. Bloodless deaths, you see—no murder on the wind to alert the Untamed. And with a nod from Wulfric, we dragged the bodies inside and settled in to wait.

"'Not long.

"'I smelled them before I heard them, crouching in the rafters above. Aleks was beside me, rocking back and forth in the grip of some quiet elation I didn't yet understand. Percival was hid in the dark above the doors, Wulfric alongside him; a monster from some faerytale come to life, voice ringing in the halls of our minds.

"'*Strike swift. No cruelty. Always remember that communion is a* sacred *act. We spare these souls perdition this night. They should not suffer through salvation.*

"'His eyes fixed upon mine then, his thoughts in my own.

"'*Watch and learn, Petit Monstre.*

"'His gaze fell on the warehouse doorway as it creaked open. Three figures entered, drenched in the stink of cheap flesh and cheaper perfume. They'd been feasting upon the drunk, I could tell that in an instant—the intoxication within their victim's blood passed on to them who'd stolen it, all three of them stumbling.

"'A slender rake with a curled moustache, silvered with age. A short woman, freckled skin and blue eyes, her laughter sharp as a broken bottle. A brawny slab of beef armed with a heavy longblade, thick beard still stained with blood. This last tripped and almost fell as he followed his comrades inside, growling as he peered about the warehouse.

"'*Remy? Told you to stand watch, if you and Mac've got whores in here again*—

"'*Remy is indisposed.*

"'The trio whirled about as Wulfric dropped from overhead, standing now between them and the doorway. The slab of beef drew his blade, the rake a cleaver from his doublet.

"'*The bleeding fuck are you?* Slab growled.

"'*We are deliverance. For thee and all our accursed kind.*

"'*… We?*

"'The woman looked up, Aleks and Percival and I flocked in the rafters like crows at a funeral. And in that moment, Wulfric struck, so swift and silent I barely saw him move.

"'One moment he'd stood motionless; a statue of onyx and alabaster. But in a blinking, he'd sliced his palms with his fingernails, his blood hardening into blades. The scent was so potent, the power so *strange,* I could only gawp in astonishment as his body splashed into a puddle of red, re-formed directly behind the trio. And then he was dancing between the sands of the hourglass; a blur of black, painting crimson ribbons on the air behind.

"'The woman's legs left her body—sliced through clean at the knees. As she fell, she looked bewildered; the attack so swift, her brain had not yet registered the pain. But as she struck the floorboards, she screamed, blood fountaining from the stumps of her thighs. Aleks dropped like a stone into the fray, and Percival dove also; landing atop the bloodied woman like a vulture to carrion.

"'Aleks hit the Slab from behind, bones crunching, ribs breaking. With a roar, the big Dyvok stumbled, lashing out with his longblade. Like a dancer on a crimson stage, Wulfric struck, taking the Slab's swordarm off at his elbow. Steel rang bright as the longblade fell to the floor, coupled with another awful roar of pain. Flailing, the Slab was borne to the bloody boards by Aleks. Looking down, I saw Percival sat atop the woman now, finger to her lips as he Pushed with the power of his blood.

"'*Hush now, mother. Have no fear. All will be well now, husssssssh.*

"'All this, the Rake had watched with widening eyes. I knew not the kinship these three shared, but loyalty among the damned only stretches so far, and *never* as far as forever. With a curse, he bolted for the wall, crashing through the bricks as if they were glass. But I was moving then, stirred to action at last. Flying like an arrow, I struck his back, punching us both through a pile of packing crates into a tumble of mud and broken timber.

"'He rolled atop me, bigger and stronger, coat and face blacked with muck. I flinched as he struck with his cleaver—all the dreadful strength of his bloodline in the blow. But I was grandchild of the Forever King, and the blade did little more than crumple like paper on my flesh. The Rake's fist met my jaw, skull ringing with his second blow, his third. But I hung on, clawing at his face, his eye popping loose as my thumb sank knuckle-deep into his socket.

"'His scream was cut short—bloody hands twisting his head so savagely, I heard every vertebra in his neck shatter. His body was torn off me then, hanging limp in Wulfric's grip. My master was spattered red, dark eyes alight, bloodscent hanging thick on the air with the sound of … *swallowing*. Looking through the hole in the warehouse wall, I saw Percival atop the woman, dug like a tick into her throat. Aleks was likewise drinking, the Slab moaning as she crushed him in a deadly embrace. Wulfric tore the Rake's doublet away, pale torso bared. And with not a snarl but a prayer, he sank his fangs into the Rake's throat.

"'I watched the Kiss take hold as Wulfric drank, the Rake's eyes alight. But the Dyvok's euphoria soon soured as he realized—just as I—that my master was not stopping. Growling deep, swallowing deeper, every red mouthful dragging that sinner closer to the death he'd so long cheated. Too wounded to fight, the Rake could only groan, terror bubbling up his throat. At the last, desperate, he looked to me, lips moving in a silent plea. And with one last gasp, he simply burst apart.

"'He'd not been long dead—black skeleton and charred clothes tumbling from Wulfric's grip. I looked to Percival, rising from the ruin of the woman he'd drunk. Aleks was staggering upright, lashes fluttering, ashes smeared across her chin and hands. And as one—Wulfric, Percival, Aleks—all spoke the same refrain. The same prayer.

"'*By this blood shall we have life eternal.*

"'I knew not what I'd seen; cold horror washing through the most of me. But in my remainder, there was a kind of wonder. Because looking to Aleks now, I could see the traceries of rot in her skin, the too-long-dead dullness of her eyes had *receded* a touch. The mark of death's cruel hand had somehow been dimmed by this …

"'*Communion,* Wulfric told me, there among the ashes. *So it was named by my forebear, Illia. Founder of our Faith. A sacrament, intended to save these poor souls within our own immortal shells, there to preserve them from hellfire until* all *are judged.*

"'Percival stood by his right hand now, Aleks looming at his left. Wulfric pawed a spatter of blood from his cheek, his voice gone dark and thick.

"'*So now ye know, Petit Monstre. The path by which all Esana may find salvation. To punish the wicked, to be his monstrous hand upon this earth; all these our callings. But* this *be the holiest of our tasks. Burden and blessing both. For the weight of those saved is heavy, and the wait for the Redeemer is long. But such is the duty of the damned.*

"'I was amazed at all this. Remember, I'd been raised a God-fearing girl, and ever I'd sought a way to save my immortal soul. But glancing again to Aleks—her eyes a touch sharper, her skin more wholesome—I wondered if I might not redeem soul and body *both*.

"'And so I bowed my head and answered. *Until judgment comes.*

"'Wulfric seemed pleased with that; with the fire and hunger now flickering in my mind. And with no more ado, we left those ashes where they'd fallen, and returned to the priory. Percival was in a playful mood for nights after, carrying me about the library on his shoulders in a display of his fresh-stolen strength. Aleks studied the grey of her fingernails, the skeins of rotten veins beneath her skin, the mark of death now faded.

"'For my own part, I prayed with newfound fervor after that night. Diving into the Faith headfirst, headlong. I slew sinners with holy abandon, each murder a prayer to God, writ in blood. I read every word on the Esana in Wulfric's library a hundred times over, I prayed like a saint to Illia every dawn and dusk, giving myself over utterly to her path toward redemption. And in my private moments, alone in my coffin, I ran slow fingertips over the ropes of sticky muscle and bone that had been my face, and I wondered.

"'It was nights later I found myself beneath his window again, the blood of some dead murderer on my tongue. My face was upturned, snowflakes pressing gentle kisses upon my eyelids as I listened to Laurent play—the grim but sweet *Memoria Di*. The hymn seemed appropriate somehow, and so caught up was I in its spell, in blood-born fancies of what I might be and become, I almost did not notice Laurent had stopped playing.

"'I opened my eyes and found him on the balcony above, just a handful of feet and a lifetime away. Skin like cream and hair like gold, sightless eyes heavenward. I wondered what he was thinking. Wondered if I stole enough strength through communion, if I might simply peer inside his head, speak to him as my master spoke to me.

"'But what would I possibly say?

"'*You did not run away tonight,* he called.

"'I froze; a fox as the hounds start baying. He was talking to *me,* I realized. He knew I was there. Cursing myself a fool, I turned, snow crunching underheel.

"'*No, please don't go. You needn't be afraid.*

"'I hung still, terrified, most of me wanting to flee but …

"'*Are you … an angel?*

"'I scoffed at that, and at the sound he smiled. Though he saw nothing, he yet swiveled his head toward me, wind tousling golden curls about his cheeks.

"'*You smell like a church. Incense and candlesmoke. And you must have wings to get over the walls every night. What is your name, mademoiselle?*

"'I spoke then, my first words to him, slow and slurred.… *Celene.*

"'I shook my head.

"'*I am no angel.*

"'He blinked at the shape of my voice, but smiled regardless, crooked and dimpled.

"'*Well, you cannot be a devil, Mlle Celene. The Fallen have no ear for hymns, I wager. And you've been stealing in here to listen to mine for months now.*

"'I should've fled. Turned and vanished from his life evermore. Wulfric's rage would be boundless if he learned I'd revealed myself to this boy, blind or no. The Vow I spoke every night told me I must hold no mortal bond dear. Yet, I was so overwhelmed to be actually *speaking* to him, I found the words tumbling out before I could stop them.

"'*You play beautifully. Like God's own songbird.*

"His smile dimmed then. *In his gilded cage.*

"'I said nothing, afraid of my voice, searching his blind eyes for meaning.

"'*Forgive me,* he scoffed. *There are thousands in this city who'd trade places with me in a heartbeat. I am blessed, I know it well. Freedom is a small levy for a life so charmed.*

"'I frowned, not understanding. This boy was the son of a baron. He'd wealth and power beyond anything I could imagine. He could have anything he wanted.

“‘*Freedom?*

“‘*My parents do not permit me to leave the château grounds, save for mass on prièdi.* He shrugged. *Mama fears for my safety, and Papa, of what everyday folk might think of my affliction. I am supposed to rule this city one day. But I’ve never wandered her streets, nor heard her songs but from a distance.*

“‘I stared at him; his mystery unraveling. I’d thought it odd—that this princeling would stand at his balcony near midnight and talk so free to a stranger. But looking at him now, clinging to those rails like a prisoner to the bars of his cage, I understood.

“‘Laurent Durand was *lonely*.

“‘*Would you like to?*

“‘He frowned at my whisper. *Like to what?*

“‘*Hear her sing up close?*

“‘He scoffed again, brushing a curl from his brow. *I’d love nothing more. But unless you truly* are *an angel, and can bear me hence on golden wings—*

“‘He flinched, blind eyes wide with shock, stepping back as I scaled the wall in a blinking and alighted onto the balcony beside him. He might’ve fled inside then, save for the touch I pressed upon his cheek, gentle as falling snow.

“‘*Be unafraid, Laurent Durand. I will* never *hurt you.*

“‘*What … what* are *you?*

“‘*I am like you. I am alone.*

“‘He hung still, clearly wondering if he should call the gens d’armes. But steeling his jaw, he reached out, gentle hands questing until they brushed my scarf. He held still a moment, his question unspoken, and I understood he wanted to *see* me, in the only way he could. He touched my hair then, fingertips drifting over my lashes, toward my bare cheeks and the terrible wounds below. I’d not felt another’s hand upon me since Philippe died, and I was almost unmoored by it. But much as I *ached* at his touch, I feared what he would see, and I reached up, holding him still.

“‘*Take hold of my hand, Laurent. If you’d not be alone.*

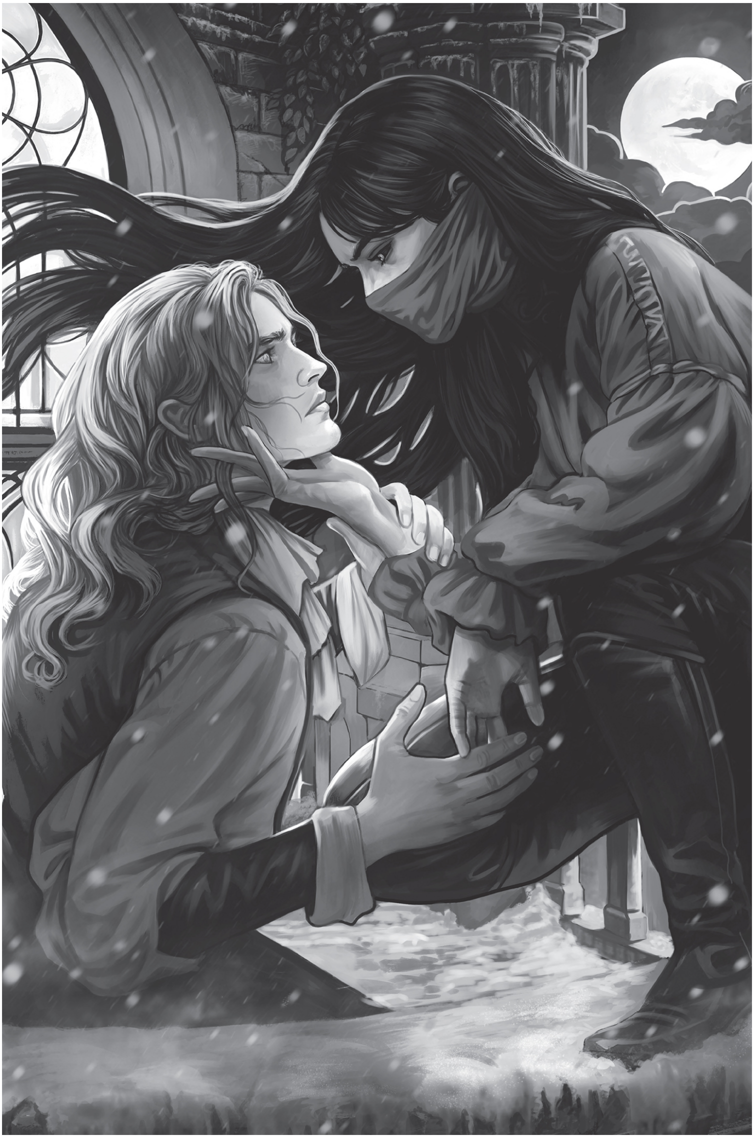
“‘Silence hung between us, and I’d have given my eternity to know what he thought then. All the moments, all the hurts, all the tiny deaths he’d suffered that brought him to this. But in the end, I knew not what he was thinking. Only what he did.’”

“And what did he do, Mlle Castia?”

The Last Liathe looked across the river then, her gaze gone hard. She searched the historian’s torchlit eyes, looking for sarcasm. But she found no trace, and thoughts brushing feather-soft upon the Marquis’s, she felt only genuine curiosity, and a hint of the candlelight warmth that dwells ever in the heart of the secret romantic.

The only reply she gave was a smile.

Jean-François smiled in kind.
“He took your hand.”



XI

KISS AND TELL

"'YOU'RE UPSET,' REYNE said.

"'I'm not upset,' Dior replied.

"'You're pacing.'

"'I *like* to pace.'

"'What are you looking for?'

"'My fucking cigarelles.'

"'Dior, you've got one in your mouth.'

"'… Oh.'

"The Grail slumped on the edge of her bed, dragging fiercely on the aforementioned smoke. She was in a state of half undress—a fact I mention only to point out that my moth was once again hidden in the jackets and shirts and britches strewn across her cabin floor."

"And the Princess á Maergenn?" Jean-François inquired.

"She was not on the floor with me, no."

"I was inquiring about her state of undress, Mlle Castia."

The Liathe sighed. "More than Dior."

The historian wiggled his eyebrows. "*Scandalous.*"

"We were less than a week from Augustin now, *Dawnseeker* speeding like an arrow across the Gulf of Antoine. Preparations were underway among Dior's Unbound, drills run constantly upon the decks. We'd no word of the capital, no knowing what state it might be in when we arrived. Maryn counseled that God would set the steerage of our course, that we must hold true to our faith. But she still seemed *terribly* frail, and the thirst had gripped us both deeply by then, weakening us all the more. Summer was spent, autumn's chill begun, and if it came to bloodshed when we landed, with only a single duskdancer and a couple hundred former thralls to fight with us, I'd no idea how battle might fare.

"Dior was obviously afeared also, our training redoubled. But though her efforts were tireless, we'd made little progress of late. The Grail's mind was filled with worries of what might come, of the losses she might suffer against the Forever King. She was not afraid for herself—in fact, she seemed eager to face Fabién. But she feared for those under her command. And so she'd accepted invitation from her paramour to spend some much-needed time in her cabin, hoping to relieve some obvious tensions.

"That the Princess was besotted with the Grail was in no dispute. But despite the danger on their horizon, there was still a threshold Reyne would not allow Dior to cross. They'd reached that limit now, the Grail's frustration plain as she hissed smoke through clenched teeth. Reyne sat behind her, arms about Dior's waist, pressing warm lips to her neck.

"'Please don't,' Dior murmured.

"'I thought you liked my kisses,' Reyne whispered, nuzzling her ear.

"'I *do* like them. But if you're going to drag me off the stove before I whistle, it'd be easier if you'd not set me boiling at all.'

"Reyne pressed her brow against Dior's back, sighing soft. 'I'm sorry.'

"'You've nothing to apologize for, Reyne.'

"'I don't know what else to say.'

"'You don't have to say anything. You're not ready, and that's that. And I'm trying. God and Martyrs and Mothermaid, Reyne á Maergenn, I am *trying* my best not to be a sow about it. Just … don't ask me to turn bloody cartwheels either.'

"'It's hard for me, too. I *want* to truly, but…'

"The Grail cast her eyes skyward and scowled. 'God is watching.'

"'The Testaments name it a sin to share a bed before wedlock.'

"'Well, the Testaments *also* name it sin for the deer to lie with the deer and the doe with the doe. So I s'pose we're doubly fucked.' The scowl deepened. 'Or *not,* as it turns out.'

"Reyne chuckled, brow pressed against the smooth arc of Dior's bare back. And at the sound of her laughter, the Grail turned, looking upon her beloved. Their eyes met, not so much falling into each other's gaze as flying, despite the tension between them. And smoothing back a braid of strawberry blond, Dior pressed her lips to Reyne's.

"It was gentle to begin, soft as the sighs that slipped their lungs, melting together like frost in summer sun. I thought to turn my eyes away then, that this moment should be their own, but in truth I'd seldom seen such sweetness in so simple a thing. It was not a kiss they shared in that moment, but a *vow,* wrought by gentle hand and flickering tongue. A vow that despite any prohibition, their love remained. And would endure.

"The heat between them rose, lips pinked from pressure now, fingertips roaming bare skin like lost travelers in search of fire. But as they strayed too far, Reyne whispered protest and Dior groaned, flopping onto her back.

"'Of all the girls in the empire I could've fallen for, I had to pick the one with morals.'

"'… You still love me, then?'

"The Grail turned, smiling at her Princess across the tangled bed.

"'As the boozehound loves her bottle.'

"Reyne scoffed. 'That's not very romantic.'

"'What about … As the moons love the stars?'

"'Oh *God,* that's worse,' Reyne laughed, tossing a pillow at Dior's head. 'If I was in the mood for bad poetry, I'd talk to Joaquin. He's penned a book of it.'

"Dior levered herself up on her elbow, smiling down at her girl. 'Well, how shall I measure my love for thee, O Princess of Lands High and Low? I'm no soothsinger to write you a sonnet, Majesty, nor pen a ballad sweet enough to pry you out of your royal britches.'

"'I'm *out* of my britches, in case you didn't notice.'

"'I *am* aware.'

"Reyne reached up, caressing Dior's cheek. 'You don't need to write me songs. Or call me Majesty. Just tell me you're mine.'

"'I'm yours. Until world's end and dawn dies.'

"The Princess wrinkled her nose. 'That wasn't bad, actually.'

"'Stole it from M. Marenn. So his poetry can't be all *that* bad. But speaking of…'

"'… Where are you going?'

"The Grail was out of the bed, scooting her britches up over her hips. 'Talk to the capitaine. Check on my boys. They've been drilling hard the last few days.'

"Reyne sat up, wrapping the sheet about her. 'It's late, I'm sure they're fine.'

"'I'm sure they are, too. But we're only a few days from Augustin, and fuck knows what's waiting for us there. If I'm asking these men to fight an Endless Legion in my name, least I can do is take the time to share a smoke and wag the chin.'

"Reyne smiled. 'I overheard a few of them talking yesterday. About how you carry yourself around them. How you know the hamlets they came from, the names of their wives and bairns. Those men *love* you, Dior Lachance. They'd die for you.'

"The Princess tucked an errant braid behind her ear.

"'I would, too.'

“Dior tugged on her boots, stole a swift kiss.

“‘Not if I can fucking help it.’

“And slinging on her frockcoat, the Grail left the cabin.

“She nodded to two burly Unbound standing guard nearby, beards and hair braided for war, tabards chalked with her chalice and flame. The men fell into step behind her, marching down the narrow corridor in lockstep.

“‘You got any traproot, Jackson? I’m almost out.’

“‘Apologies, Holy Maid,’ one fellow replied. ‘Ye smoked my last yesterday.’

“‘I did? That was rather cuntish of me.’

“‘I thought the same,’ the second fellow smirked.

“Dior growled in faux outrage, punching the fellow’s arm. ‘Go to hell, Derrick.’

“‘Were you to lead me there, I’d surely follow.’

“With a soft scoff, Dior led the pair aft to the capitaine’s cabin. The hour was indeed late, but a soft glow could be seen beneath the door, soft voices within. Dior knocked once, leaving her Unbound on guard as she stepped inside.

“A quartet of figures awaited beyond, gathered around a wooden table scattered with nautical charts. The cabin was a homely place, well lived in, not a single book in sight. The walls were hung with maps and a portrait of a stern old woman who bore a striking resemblance to the man at the table’s head. Elaina slept on a blanket in the corner, the hound softly wuffing as she chased cats in her sleep.

“Dior tipped an imaginary hat. ‘Aright, Capitaine?’

“Declan á Connell was not the sharpest knife aboard *Dawnseeker,* but what he lacked in intellect, he made up in size. He stood six and a half feet tall, dish-plate hands making the wheellock and cutlass he wore look like toys. His left hand was scarred by an ornate skull marked with the Ossian rune for *D*—the Draigann’s brand. Á Connell had served that monster a score of years; commanding this very ship when its name was *Marauder*. And though he never spoke of that time, we sometimes heard him weeping in his sleep.

“‘I’m well, Holy Maid,’ he grunted. ‘And ye?’

“‘Still breathing.’ She turned to the others about the table, smiling at both in kind. ‘Mlle Phoebe. M. Marenn.’

“Phoebe kissed Dior’s cheek, drawing her into a warm embrace. Joaquin gifted the Grail his charmer’s smile, dipping his head.

“‘La demoiselle du Graal. How fares your quest?’

“‘The balls are still bright blue. Merci for asking, Joaquin.’

“‘Sorry to hear that.’ The lad slipped hands into pockets, rocking back on his heels. ‘If you need any pointers on the subtle arts, you know who to ask.’

“Phoebe scoffed, eyeing the lad up and down. ‘Ladies’ man, eh?’

“‘I *was* something of a favorite around Aveléne. At least, before Isla…’

“Joaquin’s voice faded then, a shadow come over him as he spoke the name of his fallen love. We knew Dior hadn’t told him the whole truth about his lady’s betrayal, the fact Isla had seen the Blackheart, not him, as her Ever After. He clearly still bled from his beloved’s loss, and yet, the shadow over Joaquin’s eyes was banished with a tip of his cap and a rake’s grin—false bravado having more use among this crew than grief.

“‘Well, a gentleman never kisses and tells.’ He grinned at the fleshwitch. ‘But I’ve known my share of fillies, Mlle á Dúnnsair. More than you, at least.’

“‘That a fact.’

“‘Well, I wager you’ve not known *any*.’

“Phoebe raised one brow, but Joaquin’s lifted even higher. ‘Oh, *really*?’

“Dior grinned, rising to her feet. ‘You surely are a quick one, M. Marenn.’

“‘That’s just what Mme Dilpont said first time she took me on a tour of her boudoir. But in my defense, I was young. And what I lacked in quality I made up for in quantity.’

“Dior and Joaquin laughed together, eyes sparkling. Phoebe shook her head, but her smile was also genuine; like most aboard *Dawnseeker,* the duskdancer was clearly charmed to the eyeteeth by the young houndboy of Aveléne.

“‘Out with it then, Mlle á Dúnnsair,’ he demanded. ‘You can’t leave us hanging.’

“‘I can hang ye all I like. Unlike some, *I* dinnae kiss and tell.’

“‘So you *have* kissed then…’

“Joaquin met Phoebe’s eyes, waggling his brows suggestively. The fleshwitch tried to match his mischievous stare, but broke up laughing instead. ‘Yer a lil’ fuckin’ twat.’

“‘And *you* are avoiding the question.’

“Phoebe glanced at Dior, shrugging. ‘Eh. A few drunken snogs. Nothing serious, like.’

“Joaquin gasped, pointing a finger in faux outrage. ‘*Jezebel!* ’

“‘Get fucked,’ Phoebe replied cheerfully.

“‘Precious little chance of that among *this* company, I fear,’ the lad grinned. ‘What about you, Capitaine? Ever rolled onto the wrong side of the hammock in a storm?’

“The capitaine raised one craggy brow. ‘What happens at sea stays at sea, boy.’

“‘Let’s hope th— *Ow*.’

“Joaquin rubbed his arm where Dior had thumped it.

“‘Wrong side of the hammock indeed,’ she muttered.

“‘From a *Church* perspective, you understand,’ he smirked, signing the wheel.

“‘Church.’ Phoebe scoffed. ‘Never could ken the whys of that about ye Lowlanders. World being what it is, ye think yer Almighty would have better things to fret on than who ye take a tumble with. Nae such judgment in the Moonsthrone, boy. The Mothers and Father care nae fer who we love. Only *that* we love.'

"'Well, Reyne and I can move up there when all this is done and shag like rabbits,' Dior said. 'Until then, all that groaning you hear from my cabin? It's not the ship's timbers in squall, it's my fucking nethers threatening to explode.'

"Joaquin sucked his teeth, shaking his head. 'Maids.'

"The capitaine nodded. 'Maids.'

"'Maids.'

"Reaching into her frockcoat, the Grail of San Michon plucked a cigarelle from a battered case, peering at the contents with a heartfelt sigh.

"'Only two smokes left.'

"'We'll fetch you some more in the capital. When we arrive in glory.'

"Dior glanced up, meeting Joaquin's gaze. And where a moment ago, he'd been all smiles and bawdy jest, now the houndboy looked at her with fire in his eyes. He tapped one of the maps on the capitaine's table, jaw set.

"'This whole city will soon sing your name.'

"Dior pursed her lips, striking her flintbox as she looked to á Connell. 'You and Reyne are the only folk aboard who've been to Augustin, Capitaine. Any idea what to expect?'

"'Depends on our foe, Holy Maid.'

"The big man cleared aside the other charts from the largest map, revealing a mighty city, cleft in three parts by a great river. Its streets and fortifications were rendered in fine detail, its name etched in a bold, flowing hand—*Augustin, Heart of the Empire*. Dior took up place beside the capitaine, cigarelle hanging from her lip as á Connell began to speak.

"'The capital is a ways upriver, where the Fer meets the Béni.' He tapped the city's third on the southern shores—a great walled grid of tanneries and warehouses, silos and smithies. 'Rive Sud is her industrial heart, fed by a port large enough to service the whole realm. The walls are stout, the cannon, *many*.' The capitaine pointed to the northern bank; a twisted tangle of tenements and tavernes and townhouses. 'Rive Nord is home to the capital's hoi polloi. The walls here are stronger still, but the belly softer, and her portside not so mighty. But she's backed by the guns of Rive Cœur.'

"Here á Connell pressed one callused finger to a great island in the middle of the river: the capital's core, around which all else revolved. It was a walled enclave of grand buildings and cathedrals, and at its heart loomed a keep so huge it beggared belief.

"'Château Impérial. She's the greatest fortress in all the realm, none her equal. When the Béni is frozen, she's a touch more vulnerable, but when the waters flow, she can only be reached by one of these.' Á Connell pointed to a series of great bridges, seven in total, linking the capital's heart to its south and north banks. ‘Summer will be ending by the time we arrive. If they’ve held off ’til now, Augustin should be safe through autumn. Nae vampire can cross fresh running water, save at bridges or in coffins. And that far upriver, the waters are fresher than a maid on her wedding night.’

“‘An Ossian maid at least,’ Joaquin murmured.

“Dior rolled her eyes. ‘You’re just rubbing it in now, M. Marenn.’

“‘It does raise the question, though,’ the capitaine said. ‘Your Celene and this … Mother Maryn … they’ll be of nae use if we’re forced to fight on river.’

“‘You’re assumin’ they’ll be of use a’tall,’ Phoebe scowled. ‘I trust Celene far as I can spit her. And the wee one I’ve nae seen hide nor hair of this whole journey.’

“‘Let me worry about the Esana, Phoebe.’ Dior scowled at the map as she dragged on her smoke. ‘We’ll not fight ariver if we can help it.’

“‘We may not have a choice,’ Joaquin said.

“‘Aye. And that’s nae our only concern.’ The capitaine pushed the map of the capital aside, drawing out another. It showed a stretch of jagged coastline, a long blue line snaking inland, Augustin marked with an ornate star. His fingers traced the river’s path back to the sea. ‘The mouth of the Béni is guarded by two bastille almost as grand as Château Impérial. And we’ll have to pass beneath them if we’re to reach the capital.’

“‘Reyne told me about them,’ Dior nodded. ‘Philippe’s Vise.’

“‘Aye. Hundred guns apiece. A natural span of stone bridges the two cliffs, and a chain runs the river’s breadth beneath, forged of pure Elidaeni steel. It’s Augustin’s first line of defense from sea assault. If the Vise is intact, we’ll have to treat with Alexandre’s fleet. But if the Emperor has lost control of the river, if the Forever King has taken one or both…’

“‘Then we fight,’ Phoebe growled. ‘Tooth and claw. Sail and steel. Yer men are strong as bears, lass. And they dance well. Fer a pack of lily-white Lowland cunts, like.’

“Joaquin blew the duskdancer a kiss. Dior stared at the maps, eyes clouded. In the soft silence, Phoebe squeezed her good hand.

“‘We stand wi’ye, Flower. To the end.’

“‘And this is only the beginning,’ Joaquin vowed.

“She looked around the cabin then, blue eyes shining.

“‘I’m glad you’re all here. Truly, I’m so happy you’re with me.’ Dior hung her head then, smoke drifting from her lips. ‘I only wish Gabe was too…’

“‘I miss him too, love,’ Phoebe said softly. ‘More than I’d admit, were he here to chide me fer it. Because he *would*. Gabriel de León loves ye, Dior. And ye *will* see him again. But he’d have ye set mind to task now. We’re still a long way from the Emperor’s throne.’

“Dior stared at the map, those words etched beneath: HEART OF THE EMPIRE. And dragging on her cigarelle, she breathed her words like flame.

"'I'll be ready.'

"We were waiting in the hold as always. The Grail squeezed through the crates, and without much more than a nod, we began to train anew. She was afire with the belief of her comrades, and if heart were the measure of her success, Dior would have been a master sanguimancer already.

"But after four solid hours, cursing and sweating and hissing frustration, she slumped onto the deck, utterly defeated. She could form her blade almost flawlessly now. But to *wield* it effectively still seemed completely beyond her.

"'I can't,' she spat, staring at the red slick on the floor. 'It's too much.'

"'You must *focus,* chérie. Quiet your mind. *Be* the blade.'

"'I'm *trying,* fuckssakes…' Dragging a pale lock from her lips, she rolled upright and began pacing. 'But I've all this *shit* to fret on now. Reyne, my men, Voss. We've no clue about the arse fuckery waiting for us ahead, Maryn still hasn't found Gabe, and every time I sit still, it feels like I want to crawl out of my bloody *skin.*'

"'You've much on your mind. Heavy lies the head…'

"'And the crown isn't even mine yet.' She scoffed, sinking to a crouch. '*Yet*? *Ever,* more like. Have you seen the size of Augustin? Can you imagine the army it must take to threaten it? Fuckssakes, we must be mad for trying this.'

"I nodded. And with a sigh, I shrugged my oilskins off my shoulders.

"'No, wait … why are you taking those off?'

"'We are done training for tonight, Dior.'

"'We are *not* done. We're days from the Vise, I have to master—'

"'These are no trifles we teach. Sanguimancy is dangerous. Particularly when it is *your* blood under sway. Above all other tools required to master it, you need a clear head.'

"'Clear head,' she scoffed, eyes flashing now. 'Fine jest coming from you. Maryn has spent more time on this trip talking to *herself* than anyone else aboard, and you've got *fuck* knows how many bloodsuckers bouncing around inside your bonce. You're both more cracked than a dropped chamber pot, twice as full of shit, and you talk to *me* about…'

"The Grail faltered then, the momentary glint of cruelty in her eyes fading. She caught her breath, hand to her heart, cheek pinked with shame.

"'… Sweet Mothermaid, I'm sorry, Celene. I didn't mean that.'

"We glanced to the porthole, that shadow lurking in the reflection, pressing cold hands against the glass. And we shrugged.

"'Truth is the sharpest knife.'

"'I don't know why I said that.' She seethed upright, slipping her last cigarelle from her battered case. 'I don't know what the *hell's* wrong with me lately.'

"We tilted our head, watching her pace.

"'All your life, everyone you trusted either betrayed you, or was taken away. And so you learned to trust no one. To rely on none but yourself. But this is not Lashaame. You are surrounded by those who love you, Dior. So if you cannot do it all, do all that you can, and trust that we who stand with you will do the rest.'

"The Grail slowed her stalking, leaning on the pillar as she drew out her flintbox. 'We make quite a pair, don't we?'

"'How so?'

"'Just … We both got very good at being alone over the years, I s'pose.'

"'But we are not alone. Not anymore.' We smiled, tapping our brow. 'Not ever.'

"The Grail dragged deep on her cigarelle, sinking to her haunches with her back to the pillar. And breathing a lungful of grey, she spoke. 'So spit it, bitch.'

"'I beg your—'

"'Nine lives. Two left.'

"'Oh no,' I scoffed. 'You are supposed to be earning that tale with your training.'

"'Well *you're* the one refusing to train me, and we have to do something to pass the time. I'm too tight-wound to sleep, and there's naught else to do in my bed, so…'

"'So.'

"'So tell me how you learned about never being alone.'

"We looked again to the porthole, the shadow swelling beyond. We could feel him bubbling beneath our skin, like a kettle coming to boil, and we wondered what might happen when he finally sang. But beyond Wulfric, we could feel the others now, clamoring in that silence; Octavia and Dmitri and Alexandra and Anastasia and Viktor and Anna and Aléne. And beneath them all, the smallest, the quietest, the hardest.

"The first.

"We hung our head.

"Closed our eyes and sighed.

"'Her name was Victorine.'"

XII

FIRST AND LAST AND ALWAYS

“‘THREE MORE YEARS had passed since my master had shown me the truth of what we were. Three years that were both the darkest and brightest of my life.

“‘My time in San Yves was a wonder. An *awakening*. So many mysteries unveiled. So many truths laid bare. Wulfric taught me of the Wars of the Blood, the fall of the Redeemer’s line, the vigil we surviving Faithful kept afterward. I learned those travel-stained men who visited the priory were seekers in Wulfric’s thrall, looking for signs the holy bloodline had not been extinguished. Sometimes Wulfric himself would venture forth from San Yves, bursting into a spray of crimson moths and winging his way toward some distant rumor, some faint hope, always proven false.

“‘But ever, his vigil endured.

“‘My master had forgiven me, and we became much closer in those years. He schooled me in swordcraft, drilling in the dark of the priory’s belly. His lessons were cruel, often leaving me without limbs, broken and bloodied. But on that crucible, I became just as fierce as that little girl who’d played soldiers with her big brother had pretended to be. Wulfric sat with me for hours in the library some nights, reading from holy scriptures brought out of Charbourg’s ruins by his own hands, and I would sit at his feet like the dutiful daughter I still pretended to be. He was a *brilliant* teacher, through which history, philosophy, theology all flowed like light through a window. But his moods remained as treacherous as the sea, the souls within him ever unquiet.

"'I think he was only truly at peace when he hunted, and we did so often together those nights; the four of us slaughtering the wicked and impious side by side. Percival and I would bring our master propositions like offerings on a tasting menu—a drunk who'd beat his wife to death, an alderman grown fat with bribes, a den of lush young cutthroats. But Wulfric's favorite was to simply walk the streets, wandering where God willed him, peering into people's minds until he unearthed a sin worth murdering them for.'

"'Doesn't everyone have one of those?'

"I looked up then, found Dior watching me across the hold.

"'I mean, if you look deep enough, you're going to find evil in every heart, aren't you? Especially if you're the one who gets to decide what's evil and what isn't?'

"'It is true,' I nodded. 'But we killed murderers, Dior. Brutes and animals. In doing evil, we took evil out of the world, just as the Vow Esana bid us. I'll admit, alone in my coffin during the day, I sometimes found my thoughts troubled at all this death. But I told myself that was simply weakness. Mortal frailty, unshed. Illia's teachings were the salvation of my soul, and I'd never given up on my dream of heaven. If I did not kill the wicked, should I instead kill the good? And if I allowed evil to continue, did that not make *me* more evil still? But even at its worst, when I'd spent hours washing out the gore from my clothes, the stench of blood from my hair, staring into the looking glass at the place my reflection should've been and wondering what I had become … still I had him.

"'My sweet Laurent.

"'He had grown, my songbird; a man of nineteen now, where once had stood a boy. Gone was the quiet voice, the shy manner, the babe in the woods. Broad shoulders and strong jaw and a growing worldliness that pleased his father no end. But not so much as it pleased me. For it was *I* who had drawn him out of his shell. *I* who had stolen to his balcony at nights and whisked him out into the city that would one day be his.

"'Over those three years, we visited night markets and tavernes, smoke dens and operas. San Yves was a maelstrom in those nights, and few paid attention to two youngsters out for a taste. The Forever King's legion had crushed my homeland by then, and all knew San Yves must soon become his target. The City of Spears was awash with Nordish refugees, with soldiers, with music and smoke and the desperation that comes with what feels like final days. And into that, Laurent and I plunged, I his eyes, and he my mortal heart, living each night like our last.

"'He never asked. Never once in all our time together. We spoke of what I saw and what he heard. Of life and dreams and hopes of what he might one night be. But he never asked what I was. He knew only that I was his friend, and in that, I hoped there might be enough. But I could feel it in him. A budding discontent. A growing thorn.

"'A question that one night soon must be answered.

"'My comrades and I were kept busy—there was no shortage of sinners in those nights. No shortage of kith, either. Many were the fledglings and mediae scuttling eastward before Fabién's advance, seeking succor at San Yves's breast. And upon them, my comrades fell, ravenous, righteous, drinking them down like wine at an endless red wedding. The rot on Aleks's flesh was almost gone, the decomposition of her mind full healed by her holy depredations. She looked at me with pity now, skulking about with collar upturned and face wrapped in scarves, and I think it was *she* who convinced Wulfric to take me out that night.

"'I'd awoken early, hoping to steal some time for myself after my bloody duties were done. It had been weeks since I'd been out with Laurent, and he'd seemed troubled of late. But when I arose from my coffin, I found a gift upon it, tailored just for me; a gorgeous crimson gown of crepe georgette and lace. And as my wondering eyes roamed the bodice, my cold hands the fabric, I found a mask beneath.

"'It was porcelain. Pale as my skin, cool beneath my fingertips. Eyes rimmed black and lips painted red and a beauty spot pricked upon the cheek. I was not so long dead I could not remember how I'd once looked, and though no mirror would cast my reflection now, still I knew I was staring at myself. Or at least, a version of her.

"'The face of the woman I would never be.

"'*Doth it please thee?*

"'I turned at the voice and found Wulfric in the doorway to my chamber. He was attired for a night in the company of quality—a stunning black frockcoat, a shirt of white silk, a ruby at his cravat. I glanced at the gown again, sleek and red as heartsblood.

"'*My favorite color.*

"'He smiled, fangs gleaming—it seemed he was in one of his good moods tonight. And reaching into his pocket, he held a domino of dark leather over his face. The mask had a devilish motif, small horns and blood-red lenses, hiding the pitch-black of his eyes.

"'*Hurry and get dressed, chérie. We shall be late.*

"'*… Late for what, Master?*

"'*A grand ball is being held to raise funds for the war in the west. All the luminaries of San Yves shall be there assembled. I thought we might attend. As famille.*

"'He left me then. And though this was passing odd, my master was ever a strange one, and this, not the strangest thing he'd done. I dressed quickly, admiring the gown's fit; the way it accentuated all I had and hid what I did not. And pulling on my gloves, mask in hand, I went in search of the others.

"'I found them in the library, gathered beneath shelves overflowing with ancient tomes. I saw Percival was attired like Wulfric—a near-perfect replica of our master's outfit, including his own little horned mask. Standing beside each other, they appeared father and son, which I suppose was the point. But if my master and his tiny acolyte were reflections of each other, then Aleks was day to their night.

"'She was arrayed in a floor-length masterpiece of milk-white silk. A wasp-waisted bodice and skirts, a fox-fur mantle and a necklet of rubies, like a spray of fresh blood across her breast. She was heavy-boned, broad, yet the gown was fashioned to soften her edges, cover the traces of rot lingering in her skin. Her strawberry curls were perfectly styled, face hidden behind a moon-shaped volto, and if not beautiful, she was at the very least …

"'*You look wonderful,* I told her.

"'*Merci, little sister,* she curtseyed. *You also paint a fine portrait.*

"'I bound the mask about my ruined face, winding a lush silken scarf around my throat. *Finer now, methinks*.

"'*Now*. Aleks glanced to our master. *Perhaps always, God willing*.

"'*Come,* Wulfric said. *San Yves awaits*.

"'We departed, and the members of my strange little famille seemed of high spirits. Percival jested, bowing low and draping his cloak over snowdrifts so Aleks and I need not wet our shoes. Wulfric strode like a king, arm in arm with Aleks. With her free hand, she held mine, and though her touch was ice, still I felt a spark of warmth in my dead chest as we walked the noble quarter. Like we were meant to be together, and always would be. But that warmth died as we turned down Rue de la Montagne and I saw our destination.

"'*Château Durand.*

"'It made sense of course; that Laurent's father, the Baron Durand, would be spearheading efforts to raise war funds among the nobility. But still, a chill spread through my veins as we walked through the grand gates I'd so often stolen past, Wulfric offering polite nods to the house gens d'armes. I could hear a string quartet as we trod the snow-clad path up to the estate house, my eyes flitting to that familiar balcony above. But the curtains to his bedchamber were drawn. My Laurent nowhere to be seen.

"'The Baron and his wife were greeting guests at the door, clad in matching outfits of Durand crimson, embroidered with towered shields. Their faces were hidden by matching golden dominos, but as the Baron turned to my master, I could see surprise in his eyes.

"'*Bonsoir, Monsieur…?*

"'*Boucher*. Wulfric smiled, warm as a taverne hearth on a rainy night. *A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, good Baron. May God bless and keep you.*

"'*Ah, of* course, *the mysterious M. Boucher,* the Baronne smiled. *Patron of* *our priory, I had* so *hoped you would come. Abbess Remillaud speaks highly of your piety.*

"'*And my purse, I am sure*. Wulfric chuckled with our hostess, kissing her proffered hand. *Baronne Durand, this is my wife Aleks, my son Percival, my daughter Celene*.

"'*Oh, aren't they* darling.

"'*Merci, madame*. Wulfric bowed, hand to heart. *We would thank you and your husband humbly if you would* invite us into your beautiful home.

"'I caught the inflection in my master's words, the soft glaze that came over the Baron's face as the stolen gifts of Wulfric's countless victims took hold. Not for the first time, I felt envy that such power was his, and that envy was only enflamed as I glanced to Aleks, barely a trace of death's hand left on her skin. Such boons might also be mine one night. But thus far, Wulfric had given no clue as to when I might be offered communion, and stand beside my fellows as Liathe of the Esana.

"'*But of course,* Baron Durand bowed. *All of you, please enter and be welcome*.

"'My master smiled. And simple as that, we walked inside. You might think it odd, that in nights after the Forever King took Vellene, sacked Lucía, burned San Antoine to ashes, that four vampires might gain ingress to such a house. But *long* had the lords of Elidaen ruled unchecked, and comfortable upon their thrones had these mortals become. Even in those years, it seemed impossible the Golden Host of Alexandre III and the Silversaints of San Michon could not halt the march of the Dead. Though now excommunicated, my own brother had slain great Tolyev at Crimson Glade; the Dyvok crusade for Ossway shattered upon the Black Lion's blade. Surely it was only a matter of time before the Ironhearts tasted defeat. And so, the wealthy did what the wealthy *always* do in such times; raise taxes, send poor men to the walls, and throw a party.

"'But *such* a party. It was … astonishing, Dior. The doors to a grand ballroom parted before us, a rush of sensation tingling over my skin. Hundreds of bodies, all the city's finest in attendance. The women wore gowns of gorgeous velvet and sumptuous satin, men in military uniforms with honors glittering upon their chests. Music drifted over a dancefloor crowded with warm bodies, a sea of masks. Pale porcelain and papier-mâché, leather and lace, a thousand hidden faces and mine hid among them. None looked twice at me—just another jewel in a treasure chest brimming. And looking up at Wulfric, I squeezed his hand.

"'*Merci, Master.*

"'*For what, chérie?*

"'*I can be free here.* I motioned around us, that ocean of bodies and masks. *If only for a night. For the first time since I fell to darkness, I feel almost …* normal.

"'*I did not bring thee here to hide thy nature, Celene Castia.*

"'Wulfric nodded to the balcony then, ruby lips curling.

"'*I brought thee here to embrace it.*

"'I followed his eyeline, at last finding the death-pale beauties at whom he stared. They were four in number, mingling among revelers on the mezzanine, each finely frocked and impeccably coiffed. A dark-skinned Sūdhaemi in a coat of gold, another monsieur from what might have been Talhosti stock—black curls and blue eyes and a scarlet ensemble. A fine-boned Ossian woman in sky-blue velvet, and an Elidaeni beauty to round out the group; blond hair and alabaster skin, wearing an astonishing gown of sheer black satin. Their fangs were hidden behind their voltos, but they were easy enough to spot—cruising among the luminaries of San Yves like sharks among paddling toddlers.

"'Aleks growled behind her mask, little Percival chuckling.

"'*Two Dyvok, a Chastain, and an Ilon walk into a ball …*

"'I glanced at him sidelong. *I did not think kith of one line mixed with others.*

"'*They be lovers,* Wulfric said. *Bonded by blood into a hellish ménage à quatre. They arrived seven nights back from Madeisa. They hath already murdered a dozen innocents, and slaved the master of House Gauthier, of whom they are guests this eve.*

"'Wulfric nodded to the Elidaeni lass.

"'*The Ilon is thine, Celene.*

"'I glanced up at him, dead heart thrilling as I finally grasped his meaning. The *reason* he had brought me here. After years of waiting, of wondering …

"'*Happy First Communion.*

"'Fangs sharp against my tongue, I looked at the vampire above. Ash blond. Crimson lips. Curves I would never possess. Though she was beautiful, gliding through the revelers like smoke, I knew she was a blight upon the innocent. A murderess in midnight silk. But in gifting her death, I knew I'd ensure her eternal life, keeping her soul safe within my immortal shell. I was *afire* with the thought, filled with the flame of God, the unshakable conviction that this was a *holy* act. But somewhere in the lightless corners of my mind, I was also aware of how communion had healed Aleks, made her as she'd been before death. And hand rising to the silk-smooth porcelain that covered my ruined face, I breathed.

"'*Merci, Master.*

"'*A crowded chapel,* Percival said. *In which to pray.*

"'Wulfric nodded. *We make no play here. These four are wilier than our former prey. Though they hath slaved M. Gauthier, they abide not in his estate, and the familiars of the Chastain,* here he nodded to the Sūdhaemi vampire, laughing among a passel of well-heeled mademoiselles, *hath kept mine own eyes at bay. When festivities are done, we will shadow them to their nest, and take them in their beds. The Chastain for Percival, the Dyvok for Aleks and myself. The*

Whisper be youngest. Weakest. He looked to me, a small smile at his lips. *Small bites to begin, chérie. That is … if ye feel thou art* truly *ready to join us?*

"'I looked at she who would be my victim. Illia's teachings ringing in my skull, heaven's choir in my ears, breathing through what remained of my lips.

"'*I am* ready*, Master*.

"'*So be it. I doubt our prey shall be so foolish as to hunt here this eve, but should they do so, do* not *interfere. If we misstep here in full view of the city's luminaries, the life we hath built shall come crashing down swiftly around us*.

"'Aleks cracked her knuckles in her silken gloves. *Véris*.

"'Wulfric kissed her hand then. *Walk soft, my liathe. And with the Lord*.

"'Aleks smiled, stalking off through the throng, Percival in her wake. I adjusted my mask, intent to follow when Wulfric's voice stopped me in my tracks.

"'*Celene*.

"'I looked to him, devil's face, angel's smile, his gentle hand on my shoulder.

"'*There be no room for sin in a heart filled with the fire of God. He is watching*.

"'I nodded, jaw clenched. *Judgment Comes*.

"'I made my way through the revelers, small enough to move without a ripple. I avoided the eyes of hungry seigneurs, begging off one young beau's attentions with murmured apologies. I was wending my way up one of the grand stairs when the Talhosti kith passed by on the way to the dancefloor, a beautiful lass on his arm. He glanced my way, but I gave no sign, slipping among the revelers like a knife. Reaching the mezzanine, I lifted a goblet of wine from a passing tray, leaning on the marble railing. My face was to the dancefloor below, as if entranced with that sea of bodies. Yet from the corner of my eye, ever I watched her; this Whisper, this sinner, this vampire who would be my first.

"'She did not *look* old, and my master had said she was young in the blood. But she stood among a circle of much older folk and I saw she held them all entranced. Again I thought of Aleks remade, and pressing my hand to the scarf about my throat, I asked myself what it must be, to be beautiful. As she was introduced to a smiling seigneur, I caught her name—*Victorine*—and I wondered who she had been before she died. This was God's will, and his fire still filled me; I was *saving her soul,* after all. But a part of me wondered, had this Victorine been wicked in life? Did she truly deserve the end I would bring?

"'And then, I saw who she spoke to.

"'He was attired in the red of his house, blond hair bound with black ribbon, blind eyes hidden by spectacles of azure glass. As the vampire leaned in and whispered, Laurent laughed and touched her hand, brimming with the newfound worldliness our nights together had instilled. It seemed his father had seen the same; my songbird no longer locked in his cage. Beyond raising funds for the war, I realized this soiree was intended to introduce the future Baron of San Yves to society, his mother now chatting amiably with the silk-clad murderess, who placed one cold claw on my sweet Laurent's arm.

"'And that holy fire in me was consumed by *rage*.

"'*Such beautiful music,* Victorine sighed. *I would love to dance.*

"'Laurent's smile was sad. *I fear I'd make a poor partner, mademoiselle.*

"'*However, my son is an* excellent *musician,* the Baronne smiled.

"'Laurent groaned. *Mama, please …*

"'*Oh, truly?* Victorine looked deep into his eyes. *Would you play for me?*

"'*My piano is upstairs, mademoiselle, I—*

"'My stomach rolled as she pressed upon his arm with her touch, upon his will with her blood, looking to the Baronne and batting long, soot-black lashes. *Please?*

"'*Go along now, Laurent,* his mother smiled, décolletage flushed under the vampire's gaze. *Play for Mlle Victorine. Yours is a gift from God; it should be shared.*

"'I looked about me then, searching for my fellows. I could see neither my master nor Percival, but I glimpsed Aleks on the dancefloor, stalking light upon her mark's heels. Wulfric had warned us to make no play here, that we were to follow our marks to their nest. But if I did nothing, if this Victorine were to …

"'I turned back to the nobles and found Laurent already gone, my fingers clutching the balustrade so tight the marble cracked. I glimpsed blond hair, red silk, disappearing up the stairwell. And without thinking, I pursued, not slipping but stabbing through the crowd now. I lost sight of them, too short to see above the crush, tempted to batter my way through. But out of the throng a familiar face surfaced, dark eyes dancing behind a devil's guise.

"'*Celene,* he said, grabbing my arm.

"'*Percival …*

"'*Aleks and my marks have caught themselves a pair of lambs,* he whispered. *They take them off to tumble, we will follow. Find the master and tell him we—*

"'*Oui, I will tell him.*

"'*Celene—*

"'*I will tell him!* I spat, snatching my arm loose. *Go, before you lose them!*

"'On through the crowd I swam, reaching the stairwell door only to find it locked. Breaking it open would draw attention, and cursing now, I hunted for another way up. Bodies all about me, warm and cloying, the music suddenly too loud, the laugher too shrill, too many people, too much. I finally found another stairwell, flashing upward, heels ringing on the timbers. Yet I'd no knowing of the manor's insides, finding myself turned about in a long hallway in what looked entirely the wrong wing. And above the murmur of the revelers below, I heard it then, as I'd heard it a hundred nights prior, bloody tears on my upturned face, distant and painfully beautiful.

"'*Laurent's piano.*

"'Out through the window I flew, crawling across the roof. My master's voice was ringing in my head—that we must be careful, that *God* was watching. But louder rang the thought that Laurent was in danger, that monstress in his room, and most, that he was playing not for me, but *her*. It feels small, I know. But I did not understand then what I do now. And though a few years dead, in truth, I was still little more than a child in my heart.'

"'It doesn't feel small, Celene.'

"I glanced up as Dior spoke, pale blue eyes shining.

"'It feels human.'

"And behind her, swelling in the reflection and pressing upon the porthole glass …

"*That was thy failure,* Wulfric whispered.

"'I crawled onward,' I told her, ignoring him. 'Over the estate roof. It had begun snowing, tiny crystals dancing to the notes of Laurent's song. But the music suddenly stopped, and the dread filling that silence was a boulder in my belly. Those last few feet were a thousand miles, swinging down onto the balcony at last and peering through the curtain crack.

"'They were sat at his piano, Laurent's fingers stilled upon the keys. But Victorine's hands were busy, one tangled in his golden hair, the other thrust deep into his britches, and her mouth was at his throat, cravat and collar loosed. Laurent's head was thrown back as she drained him, the groan spilling from his bloodless lips a rusted dagger to my heart. And at the sight, all traces of God's fire in me were extinguished, leaving me only with hatred's flame. And consumed by it utterly, I kicked through the doors.

"'Timbers split, glass cracked, curtains torn aside. The vampire gasped, lifting her mouth from Laurent's punctured throat, but I'd no time to savor that deathly perfume.

"'*Who are y—*

"'Victorine's question became a gasp as I flashed toward her. She rose from the stool in a blur, Laurent tumbling to the floor, limp and bloodless as I hissed.

"'*Get your hands* off *him.*

"'I wish I could say I gave her a grand death. Or at least a quick one. But in truth, it was neither. As we crashed upon each other, clawing and hissing and cursing, I was dimly aware of calls in the night, of alarms rising above the dim babble of the guests, the sudden silence of that string quartet. Victorine was stronger than I, but my whole body was aflame now, vision drenched red with the fury that she had hurt him, she had *hurt* him, and Almighty God, I would see her dead for it. I smashed her into the floorboards, hard enough to shatter her skull. She clawed aside my mask and caught sight of the *thing* beneath; a rime of fear chilling her eyes, a bubbling whisper on bloody lips.

"'*Please, st-stop—*

"'I twisted her head so she couldn't look at me, the crunch of her spine ringing in the room as I plunged my teeth into her neck. And I was drinking then, swallowing all she was and would ever be, shivering at the thought that the blood in her had been *his*.'"

The Last Liathe paused, a cold and silent age. The Marquis watched as she lifted one slender hand, running it gentle across the bow of her flawless lips.

"We could … *I* could not truly find words for it, Historian. Describing communion to one who has not partaken is like … trying to describe a choir at hymn to a deaf man who has never been to church. The thrill of it. The … fierce and *terrible* joy of it. To feel the breath of God upon the back of your neck. To know the kiss of heaven to your furrowed brow. To save as you destroy. Redeem as you condemn." Celene shook her head. "I have stood in holy houses, I have seen the red hand of God at work upon this earth, but I tell you now and true, I have *never* felt as close to the Almighty as I did in that moment.

"My first communion.

"'She struggled at the end. That final second. And then Victorine Ilon was gone, utterly consumed, locked within me, blood and mind and soul. A *fire* flooded through me, immolating and baptizing, purifying and redeeming, and though I was senseless, there on my knees in her ruins still I *spoke*; the only words I knew were true at the time.

"'*By this blood shall we have life eternal.*

"'A groan shook me then, tearing me from holy bliss. Laurent was on his belly, gasping and bloodless. I rushed to his side, cradled his head in my lap as I pressed my hand to his throat. But though she'd drunk perilously deep, Victorine hadn't drained Laurent to dying. Frail and pale, my songbird clutched my hand as he whispered.

"'*Celene. Y-you s-saved me.*

"'*Always,* I whispered. *You are not alone, Laurent Durand.*

"'He smiled up at me, there in my arms, setting my dead heart singing. But more than that smile, the fire of communion filled me now, the fire of faith besides. All of me burned with it; a honeyed rush so blissful I was almost overcome. This was purpose. This was power. This was *salvation,* just as Illia had promised all those centuries ago. But louder now, I heard it again—the clamor of alarm, of shouting guests and running boots. I realized these were not gens d'armes rushing up to Laurent's boudoir, but out to the snow-clad courtyard, the scent of burning torches rising above the cries upon the wind.

"'*Vampyr!*

"'*The Dead, by God! The Dead are among us!*

"'My comrades, I realized. Ma famille. A scream pierced the night, agonized and full of terror, and I knew something was terribly wrong. Laurent gazed up at me, sightless but unerring, the scent of his blood hammering upon my temples.

"'*I'll not tell them,* he breathed. *You s-saved me. I …*

"'He knew, I realized. What I was. Perhaps he'd *always* known. And though my first thought was to ask him why, hand pressed to heart, he told me all with four little words.

"'*I love you, Celene.*

"'If I'd breath, it would have failed me. If I'd a heartbeat, it would have faltered. If I was still a mortal girl, small and fragile and brimming with hope, I'd have melted then.

"'But I was not.

"'*I must go, Laurent. I'm sorry.*

"'*Before you do …* He tried to rise, heart thumping. *I've never asked. Not since that first night. But every night since, I've dreamed it. If there are no more secrets between us …*

"'He swallowed then, blind eyes gazing up at me.

"'*May I …* see *you?*

"'He lifted his hand. Bloodied and trembling. The shouts were rising, and I could hear men upon the stair now, coming to check if the young master was well. The look on his face—that *beautiful* face—was so filled with hope and love I could not tell him no. But I knew no love on earth would survive if I let him see what I *truly* was. And so, I reached to my fallen mask and bound it about my face. Holding back bloody tears as I whispered.

"'*Be swift.*

"'He was gentle as lambs. Softer than baby's breath. Blood-slicked fingertips questing over porcelain, which in truth was no cooler nor harder than my immortal flesh beneath. His touch roamed my temples, my cheeks, my lips, all of me ashiver, a moment of such intimacy as I've never known.

"'*You're cold, but …*

"'He shook his head, wonder welling in those empty eyes.

"'*You're* beautiful.

"'He moved as if in slow motion, and it seemed all the world about us fell still. Rising from my lap, drifting close, drenching me in the perfume of his blood. And pressing soft lips to my mask, he kissed me. Chaste. Brief. But in that moment, I'd have traded the rest of my forever to have it last but one breath longer.

"'*I must go. But I'll return, I promise.*

"'*I love you,* Laurent sighed again. *And I—*

"A sound cut me off then; a choking, smothered sob. And looking across *Dawnseeker*'s hold, I saw Dior, bloodshot eyes fixed on me. She was crying, we realized. *Weeping,* to talk true. Cheeks sopping wet and the boards beneath her soaked through. She clenched her jaw, waving me off as she whispered. ‘I’m sorry, I…’

“The Grail shook her head then, drawing one shaking breath.

“‘It’s so beautiful. And *so* sad.’

“She sniffled, mopping her eyes on her sleeve.

“‘D-did you tell him you loved him back?’

“We frowned at that. Looking down at our empty hands.

“*Tell her what ye did, liar*.

“‘I told him that I—’

“The song of ship’s bells crashed in our dark, cutting me off before I could finish—though in truth, I’d no idea what I was about to say. We looked skyward, heard running feet across the decks, the bells ringing fiercer now.

“*‘Alarm! ’* came the cry. ‘All hands, *ALARM*!’

“‘Shit,’ Dior hissed.

“We snaked to our feet, eyes locked as we helped Dior to hers.

“‘Company.’”

XIII

OF CRIMSON WINGS

“‘*SAILS!*’

“The cry split the air, rising over the crashing waves, the clanging bells.

“‘*Sails a starboard!* ’

“The shout was repeated, echoing through *Dawnseeker*’s belly and setting every heart afire. Dior and I charged up the stairs alongside a tumble of other folk, out into the predawn chill. The slow, rising light illuminated a sea enshrouded with fog, and soon any man not at the oars was on deck, crowded at the railings and peering into the distance.

“‘*Sails!* ’

“Capitaine á Connell stood at the wheelhouse with his spyglass, cursing that he could see nothing through the mist. Dior took up place beside him, joined by a passel of Unbound, her faithful fleshwitch, and of course her Princess, braids mussed from sleep. We shrank into the background as Reyne took Dior’s hand, the Grail shouted toward the crow’s nest.

“‘How many, Callum?’

“‘*Hard to say, Holy Maid! One, mebbe two! Galleys both!* ’

“‘Are they the Emperor’s ships?’ á Connell roared. ‘What colors do they fly, man?’

“A long slice of silence fell, the Unbound casting swift glances among themselves. If these were Alexandre’s vessels, patrolling the oceans beyond his capital, the Emperor likely still held the city. But if he’d ceded control of his seas …

"'*Ravens! '* came the answer. '*They bear ravens on their rigs! '*

"'Shite,' Phoebe spat.

"Reyne looked to Dior, squeezing her fingers. 'Voss ships.'

"This was it, then. The moment all aboard *Dawnseeker* had trained for, and many, we suspect, had dreaded. Dior's Unbound had drilled hard through the journey, tireless, fanatical. Each man now wore a golden vial about his neck, taken from Lilidh's stores before we left Maergenn. But where the Heartless had filled those vials with duskdancer blood, they now each contained a few precious drops from the Grail's wrist—enough to snatch a wounded soldier back from Death's arms.

"They'd retained the strength of their thralldom, and were a force to be respected, doubtless. But the men aboard those enemy galleys were certainly thralled, too—veterans of the Forever King's conquests. We had Phoebe and ourselves to tip our scales, but every one of those ships likely had highblooded Ironhearts aboard; God only knew their age or prowess. And at night's end, we were one ship against two.

"We could see twinned sails now, rising through the mists ahead. We could feel it among *Dawnseeker*'s company; an undertow of fear beneath their stoic façades. While these soldiers loved their savior, two-to-one odds were terrible, any way the throat was sliced. The thought they'd survived the bloody hell of Dún Maergenn only to be sunk off the coast of Augustin before our true battle had even begun …

"'Yer orders, Holy Maid?' á Connell asked.

"The capitaine, crew, Unbound—all looked now to Dior, her pale locks whipping in the wind. The Grail glanced to Phoebe, the fleshwitch whispering.

"'Courage, Flower. Fear is poison in battle.'

"Reyne squeezed Dior's hand. 'God sails with us. This is what you were born for.'

"The Holy Grail of San Michon breathed deep, searching perhaps for some strength in her blood. She was descendant of a warrior king, and *this* was her moment—the moment in every saga when every great general spoke some grand monologue, rousing their men to feats of bravery and butchery. With lips pinched, cheeks pinked, Dior stepped up to the railing, looking out on a sea of upturned faces. Sailors and soldiers, freedmen all, their shackles broken by her holy blood. They adored her, that much was plain—each seeing her as daughter, sister, messiah. But still, that dreadful undertow …

"She called out then, her words near snatched away by the winds.

"'They say the coward dies a thousand deaths. The brave man only one. They say men who fear to lose will never truly win. They say folk who fear death will never truly live. Well, *I* say *they* don't know what they're talking about. Because looking at those ships, I tell you right now, I'm *shitting* myself. And I know most of you are too.'

“A low murmur rippled among the men. But Dior’s voice was raised then, and where before the winds near drowned her out, now they seemed only to lift her up.

“‘But I say no sin is fear! If you’re unafraid to lose it, you won’t fight for what you have! If you’re unafraid to die, you won’t fight to stay alive! And if you’re unafraid of those *bastards* and the world they want to make, you won’t fight for something better!’ She pointed to those distant sails now, teeth bared. ‘You’ve seen what they do! Those pits they filled with bones at Maergenn! Those babies sold like *livestock*! They want us on our knees! They want us so afraid to fight, we dare not to fight at all! But more afraid of dying, I’m afraid of failing! Because if we fight here today, we might lose our lives, but if we run, we lose our *world*! And there’s still things in it worth fighting for! You! Callum á Sadhbh!’

“A stout fellow in a chain hauberk blinked as the Grail called to him.

“‘What are you fighting for?’

“‘My wife, Holy Maid,’ he finally called. ‘My sweet Maera.’

“‘Gaelen?’ Dior asked, turning on another. ‘What are you fighting for?’

“‘My sons, Holy Maid. Ollie and Sean.’

“Dior walked down from the aftercastle, prowling among her Unbound now. And though her voice still trembled, we realized it was not from fear, but elation. She called each man by name, dozens upon dozens, asking each what it was they cherished most. Wives and sisters, sons and daughters, vengeance and justice, all were named, the fire in each man rising with every call. Until at last, the Holy Grail reached a pretty monsieur with sharp cheekbones and ink-black locks, a hungry axe in his fists.

“‘Joaquin Marenn? What do you fight for?’

“The houndboy touched that golden vial about his neck, voice raised high.

“‘I fight for she who rescued me from bondage! Who freed my body, and saved my soul!’ Joaquin fixed her in his eyes, sinking to one knee. ‘I fight for the Grail!’

“Another knelt then, calling her name, ‘*San Dior!* ’ Dozens followed, pounding fists upon her sigil, at their chests, on their shields, until each and every soul on *Dawnseeker*’s deck was roaring aloud.

“*‘For the Grail!* ’

“*‘FOR THE GRAIL!* ’

“Dior stood among them, tears welling in her eyes as she met each man’s gaze. She full-well knew what she asked of them now. But the knowledge she need not ask at all burned the brighter, her eyes now meeting á Connell’s.

“‘Head for the enemy, Capitaine. Full speed.’

“The order was repeated aloud, the call ringing upon the decks, drums pounding swifter in *Dawnseeker*’s belly as her oars cut the waters in time. Dior made her way through her roaring men, back up to the aftercastle. Phoebe had blooded herself, a smear of crimson across her eyes. The fleshwitch did the same now for Dior, for Reyne—a blessing of her heathen goddesses to shield the girls from harm. Weapons were drawn among Dior's Unbound, blades pounding shields in time with the war drum beat that drove us onward, *onward,* and as if bid by God himself, the winds picked up at our backs.

"Sails were unfurled, canvas set with the Grail's sigil stretched taut. We were charging at the lead vessel—a sleek galley named *Shadowchild.* The wind was in our favor, the enemy slower than we, and á Connell's hope was clear: that we might deal with this first foe before its sibling came to bear. I was aflame with promise of the coming battle, hunger and bloodlust rising with the pulses now pounding around us. But a cry went up from the crow's nest then, bringing new chill to the wind.

"*'More sails! Three now! Third a starboard! '*

"A dark murmur rippled among the men, and á Connell's face ran bloodless. With faith and luck and wind's blessing, it might be a ship our size could move swift among a duo of enemies, cut the odds closer to our favor. But we were so heavily outmatched now, I admit even *my* belief began to waver, casting dead eyes to heaven above and whispering.

"'Do you *want* us to fail?'

"*'Have faith, now.'*

"The words rang in my mind, in the minds of those assembled, each searching for the speaker. Looking down to the deck, lips parted in wonder, Dior saw Mother Maryn had at last left the solitude of her cabin, standing among the Unbound. My Priori was still dressed in child's finery, cream-colored silk and blond curls, like some doll from a faerytale given breath and life. The sight of her among those soldiers was so incongruous it might have been comical, save for the black fire burning in her eyes.

"*'Have faith, all of thee! God Almighty stands with us this day! '*

"*Dawnseeker* charged onward toward the Voss blockade, wind howling at her back. Maryn made her way up to the aftcastle, bowing low to Dior. Our Priori still seemed small, frail, shadows of hunger and fatigue etched beneath her eyes. The sun had risen fully now, all we kith the weaker for it. Yet her gaze still burned.

"*'Sweet and holy child. Ready we stand, to serve thee.'*

"Á Connell turned to his first mate, a gap-toothed old swab named Hurley.

"'Have the cannon loaded w' grapeshot. Starboard side. We'll come about at the last, give them a burst to soften them up before we engage.'

"*'Keep thy fire in readiness, Capitaine. But unleash not ayet.'*

"Á Connell blinked at Maryn. 'If we've intent to board them—'

"*'Thou shalt have no need.'* Maryn nodded to two of the oncoming vessels. '*The crews of* Onslaught *and* Hellspawn *are more seasoned, and there be highblooded mediae among their number. Save thy fire for the moment they close.'*

"'How do you know all that?' Dior asked.

"Our Priori glanced up at the Grail and smiled, cold as wintersdeep.

"'*We feel them.*'

"Maryn looked to Phoebe, eyes agleam. '*Watch over her this day, Fiáin dahtr.*'

"She turned back toward *Shadowchild.*

"'*With me, Liathe.*'

"We nodded, the voices within us a storm now. 'Oui, Mother.'

"There came a stillness then; a brief moment when even the winds seemed to hush. Dior looked uncertain, glancing now to her fleshwitch, Reyne's hand gone to her silversteel. But Maryn ignored all, eyes closed, curls whipping in the gale. And with a soft rush of fabric, a faint red breath, she burst into pieces.

"Crimson wings fluttering, soaring upward now—the last dregs of her power used. Were she full sated, there would have been thousands of those moths, each a drop of her ancien blood. But so starved was Maryn by our journey, there were only a few hundred, raging upward into stormwashed skies.

"'God be with you, Dior,' we said. 'May heaven's host watch over you this day.'

"The Grail opened her mouth to speak, but we were already gone, bursting apart at our seams just as the Mother had done. After our training sessions with Dior, we were even more starved than Maryn, only a hundred or so pieces of us swirling upward, consciousness fragmented, a tempest of crimson wings and flickering thought, the center of us held tight to the impulse we must follow. And so we did, across the ocean in Maryn's wake, the howling wind pushing us onward toward *Shadowchild,* the men upon her decks, thralled flesh and sharp steel and eyes alight with the zeal of a Forever King.

"They cried aloud as they saw us, firing useless arrows or slinging pointless spears. Were they armed with fire, they might have hurt us, but these were soldiers who fought *for* vampires, not against them. And so it was we'd lost not a drop as we swarmed toward the mainmast, re-forming on the crossbeam. Crouching there like death's handmaid, looking upon the men we must end as we pulled down our scarf and hissed.

"'You're all going to die.'

"But Maryn herself spared no time for mind games, hundreds of moths swirling in a tightening spiral on the maindeck's heart. And there she coalesced, a red tempest given form—that dead-eyed doll in her pretty cream dress. The Voss thralls had no clue what they were seeing—not a one of them would have fought Esana before. At the sight of her, a broad, pig-eyed thug hissed between tar-dark teeth.

"'What the devil…'

"'*No devil, I,*' Maryn replied. '*I am God's own monster.*'

“And eyes agleam, the Priori of the Faithful held out her arms.”

The Last Liathe paused in her tale, gaze lost in the black waters before her. Jean-François continued writing, quill scratching swift upon the page. But silence stretched out, like a spool of ruby red between parted lips and sundered throat, and still, Celene was mute.

“… Mlle Castia?”

“I had heard tales,” she finally said. “Of the eldest of my faith. Of the dreadful feats a true master of sanguimancy might perform. I had seen the power Wulfric wielded in my years at his side. But while my master was both aged and puissant, he was a *boy* compared to Maryn. Broodchild of Illia herself. *Eight hundred and seventy-six years* her tally upon this earth. I had heard legends of the Red Crusade, but she had lived it. The Wars of the Blood. Charbourg’s fall. Maryn, Mother of Monsters, had survived them *all.*

“As she lifted her arms, the thralls about her raised battle-notched blades. They’d the look of veterans all, tabards embroidered with ornate ravens, pauldrons wrought like skeletal hands. How long had they served Fabién, I wondered? How many years his puppets? Had they bent the knee of their own free wills? Or were they akin to the soldiers Dior had rescued from Nikita? Dragged unwilling into the service of the Fallen?

“In the end, I supposed God would judge them fair.

“Maryn opened her hands, fingers splayed. A brief moment passed upon the *Shadowchild*; the air seeming to still and each soldier to gasp, reaching for their throats. And then the Priori of the Faithful closed her little fists, and each thrall on that deck erupted.”

Jean-François arched one brow. “*Erupted?*”

Celene nodded, swallowing thick. “It is the only word I can use to describe what we saw. Though truthfully, it does little justice to the … *horror* of it. Sanguimancy at its root is the gift to control one’s own blood; feel it, reshape it, wield it. But masters of the arte can wield other people’s besides. And as I watched, dumbstruck, I saw the blood of every man within Maryn’s sight burst from every orifice in their bodies—mouths, noses, ears, eyes—torn from their very veins and up into the salt-struck air.

“We’d been starved aboard *Dawnseeker,* and my hunger was close to agony by then. I’d wondered how bad it had been for my Priori; all too keenly remembering the thirst with which she’d near destroyed me. I had answer now, eyes wide as those fountains of gore sprayed out from the veins of those poor fools and into Maryn herself. The stench of blood and bladder and bowel painted the air, crimson ripping up and out from the men, veins tearing now, skins flayed and fingernails rupturing, the dregs of them flung serpentine into the sky and spattering across the deck at their feet.

“Hundreds slain in a blinking.

“A cry came from the aftercastle—a cruel gent with marble skin and hair black as pitch, sharp fangs bared as he raised his blade. Ironheart for certain.

"'Bring flame! Burn it *down*!'

"But we were moving then, flung like a knife right at that Voss's throat. The hunger in us roared, echoed by distant cannon fire, the choir of souls within. Slicing my palms, we wrought our blade, our flail, the last of our blood used in their summoning. The Ironheart readied his steel, the half dozen swabs about him likesame—a grim capitaine and a passel of bruisers, hard as coffin nails.

"I felt Wulfric's hand upon my shoulder then, guiding my swordwork as he'd done nights past, my old master never far from my surface now. He hated me more than any other inside me, but in the end, he'd no wish for me to die here—his soul would end in hell along with mine. And so together we danced as once we had in San Yves Priory, his skill, my hand, our sword slicing the air, throats opened and bellies spilled wide.

"The Ironheart was only a fledgling, but still he fought with all the rage of a monster defending its forever. We cut his men down, moving to the strains of a hymn unheard, played upon keys invisible. Our bloodblade shattered like glass on the iron of his skin, but the damage was done. And weaving past his broken guard, we snaked up behind him, fingers sinking into his shoulders and fangs into his throat.

"His name was Maël. Born the son of a cobbler in the city of Isabeau, ninety-seven years ago. Slain by a granddaughter of Morgane Voss, daughter of Fabién. A distant cousin of mine. Maël did not think himself evil, nor this invasion cruel. He thought it their *right* to rule—these children of the Forever King. Did the farmer mourn his cows when he took them to market? Did the shepherd not fill his belly with lamb?

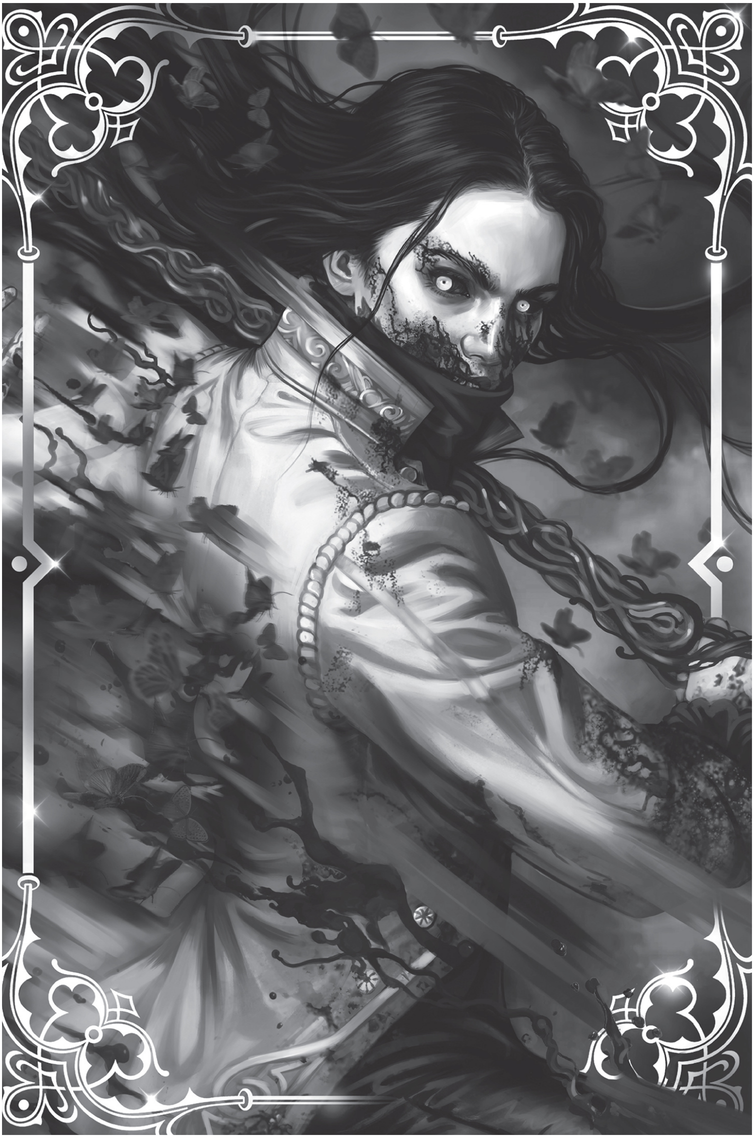
"All this I learned in what would've been a heartbeat, if only Maël's heart had still done so. But his chest was still and silent as I drank his last drop, his body undone and soul unmoored, dragged down to join the others within me. And standing in his ashes, mangled mouth peeled back from bloody fangs, I hissed the only truth I could rely on anymore.

"*'By this blood shall we have life eternal.'*

"*'Véris.'*

"I opened our eyes. And there upon the gore-washed decks stood Maryn, surrounded by corpses. Hundreds of them. She was drenched head to foot, her whole body painted crimson save for those eyes, black and bottomless as the pits of hell. And looking at me across that carnage—terrifying and absolute—Maryn only smiled.

"*'We are awake* now, *Liathe.'*



“The air crackled, distant cannon fire rising on the wind. Glancing starboard, we saw *Dawnseeker* engaged with *Hellspawn,* both galleys unloading into each other’s flanks. The *Onslaught* was bearing down also—largest of the Voss fleet—and we could see Dior atop *Dawnseeker*’s aftercastle, roaring as her Unbound prepared for boarding.

“‘We must—’

“But Maryn was already gone, splitting into a swarm of wings once more; not hundreds now, but *thousands* of moths. We followed, bursting apart and winging across the ocean swell, leaving the gutted *Child* behind us with her decks drenched red.

"Pistol smoke and black ignis fire, flashing steel and thundering drums, screaming men and spraying gore; this the hell we descended into. Grapples had been thrown, iron hooks biting into the *Seeker*'s flank, drawing *Hellspawn* close enough to board. The fighting was frenzied, shields shattered and blades splintered, bellies sundered and heads severed. The Grail was aft, Phoebe guarding the stairwell leading up to her castle, drenched to her elbows in red. We saw two highbloods among the fray—a hulking thug with a mighty warhammer, and a swift pistoleer with a brace of wheellocks—Ironhearts both, their hands dripping murder, and their eyes, hatred.

"The battle was near matched, but *Onslaught* was closing now, grapples ready. And though the Forever King wanted Dior Lachance alive, the reckless abandon with which these sea dogs pressed their attack told us they had no idea who it was they actually faced.

"A burst of grapeshot smashed *Dawnseeker*'s flank, tearing wood and flesh. Dior and Reyne dove for cover, Phoebe roaring as she bore a barrelful's brunt. The fleshwitch couldn't be killed by a blow unsilvered, but that didn't mean she was impervious to harm—her left arm shredded to the bone, her flank flayed to the ribs. The Highlander stumbled to one knee as *Onslaught* threw her grapples. And through the fray stepped that hulking Ironheart thug, fangs bared as he raised his warhammer high.

"Dior cried out, her voice near lost as *Onslaught* crashed against the *Seeker*'s portside. Phoebe raised her forearm, bone crunching as the warhammer descended. But though she warded off the blow, the thug fought not alone; that Voss pistoleer now raising two wheellocks and letting loose.

"The first shot pierced Phoebe's shoulder, whipping her crossways in a spray of red. But the second was truer, striking the fleshwitch in the eye and blowing out the back of her skull. Dior screamed again, Reyne flinching as she was painted with blood and brains. Phoebe's body tumbled over the railing, crashing into the raging waters as that thug charged toward the girls. He knew not who they were, nor did he seem to care—knowing only that Dior seemed some kind of leader among our rabble.

"Dior knew she wasn't ready to fight here, that her sanguimancy could hold no candle to this tempest. Instead, she took hold of Reyne's sword. Drawing her fist up its length, the Grail cried out, but the deed was done, silversteel anointed with her blood. And turning, Reyne raised her blade toward the charging vampire, eyes narrowed to knifecuts.

"'En garde.'

"The Ironheart was faster, stronger, unafeared of steel. Yet he was no true swordsman; used to sheer size and strength winning the day. But this day, he faced a foe trained by the Bladesingers of Montfort, armed with silversteel blessed by the blood of Heaven's Scion. As Reyne turned his first blow aside, beat his second with swift riposte to his face, the Ironheart learned how little size and strength were worth.

"The silversteel sliced his cheek—a mere scratch for a child of Voss. But as Dior's blood met his flesh, he reared back, eyes gone wide. We heard a sound, though not just a sound but a … *sensation*. As if all the earth shook and then fell still. And fire was birthed then, hot enough to melt an angel's blade and seething white-hot over that Ironheart's skin.

"He *screamed,* agonized, bubbling. The fire engulfed his face, his coat, Dead flesh catching like tinder in lost summertimes. And then his head toppled from his shoulders—spine cleaved through by the hand of the Nineswords' bastard.

"'That's *my* girl,' Dior breathed.

"Reyne grinned, twirling her bloodied blade. But the Princess's victory was short-lived. Even as the ashes of her foe struck the deck, more Ironhearts joined the fray—leaping from the *Onslaught* and landing upon the aftcastle. Three more their number; a one-eyed brigand in a capitaine's greatcoat, a fellow with a belly like a beer-barrel, a swift woman in hunter's leathers, red hair bound in slayer's braids. This last struck us familiar, though through the chaos we didn't place her, still winging toward the fray behind Maryn, desperate to reach Dior before these newcomers cut her down.

"The Princess met the capitaine, but the beer-belly drew two knives, he and the red woman skirting around Reyne's sword. And with no choice left, Dior flung out her hand.

"Blood sprayed in a bright arc, but the vampires were too swift, dancing beneath the droplets, closing fast. Teeth gritted, the Holy Grail of San Michon willed yet more blood forth, coalescing, solidifying, forged by her will into a blade of dripping crimson.

"The beer-belly came on undaunted, understanding not what he saw. But the red woman paused then, squinting through the black ignis fog, the dancing embers, the pistol smoke, eyes gone wide as she finally whispered …

"*'Lachance.'*

"We recognized her now; a foe from a lifetime ago. We could picture her among her brethren as we brawled upon the Mère, as Gabriel and Dior sent Danton Voss to hell. For this was one of the Beast of Vellene's hounds, who'd survived her master's death and his father's displeasure both, apparently serving now in his fleet.

"'Roisin…' Dior whispered.

"And then came Maryn.

"A crimson storm, engulfing the deck. We heard Beer-Belly scream, Reyne's steel striking the Dead capitaine's. We descended also, hundreds of droplets re-forming into one, cutting through the carnage and into the capitaine's back. The Ironheart staggered, a smoking gash carved through his spine by our blade. And his gasp of pain became a scream as Reyne's anointed blade sliced his skin, his body bursting into flames.

“The battle was turning, Ironhearts failing, Dior’s men cutting through their breaking thralls like knives. And in the heart of that blood-mad thresher, men fighting and screaming and dying, Roisin the Red stared at Dior, hissing cold promise through her fangs.

“‘My King will see you soon.’

“And turning, the Ironheart dove into the water like a spear.”

XIV

THIS WHOLE WORLD A GRAVE

“THE DAWN WAS ours.

“*Onslaught* was aflame, spine cracking as she slipped below the waves. *Hellspawn*’s guns were silent, and *Shadowchild* drifted listless in the fog, her decks thick with corpses. Dior stood in the midst of it all, eyes wide, spattered red. But aside from a few pockets of men still fighting belowdecks, the battle was done.

“‘Victory!’ Capitaine á Connell called, raising a red blade. ‘*For the Graaaaiiil!* ’

“The cry was taken up, men roaring, embracing, calling Dior’s name. But beaten and bruised though she was, the Grail wasted no time on celebrations, staggering down to the blood-slicked decks and laying red hands upon her wounded men. The sight of her healing the dying set our heart singing, and I knew this *here* would be our greatest strength in nights ahead. Truth is, the tally of men killed in battle is small, seigneur. Most do their dying afterward—blood loss and sepsis claiming more lives than deathblows. But while a handful of Unbound had been outright slain in our clash, any wounded yet breathing could now be saved by Dior’s sacred blood.

“Maryn made the sign of the wheel, whispering, ‘*Thanks be unto thee, O Lord.*’

“‘*Help!* ’

“The cry was faint, near swallowed by the crashing waves.

"*'Hellllp! '*

"Elaina was standing with her paws on the railing, the hound barking at the sea. Reyne ran aft, us beside her, peering out to the waves. Distant, we saw two figures in our wake—a pretty monsieur with sodden, ink-black locks, a flame-haired woman in his arms.

"'Phoebe…' the Princess hissed, tearing off her chain shirt.

"We dove soundlessly, Reyne and us, striking the water as one. Together we swam, out through the chop and snarl, toward the waving houndboy. Joaquin must have leapt over the side as Phoebe went overboard—the only one in the melee with presence of mind enough to mark her fall, and strong enough to keep her afloat in her breastplate. But M. Marenn's strength was flagging now, the fleshwitch a deadweight in his arms, blood drooling from the awful wound in her eye and skull.

"We reached the lad first, lifting Phoebe above the waterline, Reyne arriving soon after. As three, dragging our fourth, we swam back to *Dawnseeker,* Unbound gathering at the gunwales as Capitaine á Connell threw us a line and Elaina ran in panicked circles. We took hold, dragged up from the waves, supporting Phoebe's weight with Joaquin's aid. Grunting, we hauled ourselves over the rail, the bloodied duskdancer sprawled on the deck beside us. Dior knelt at Phoebe's side, red hand raised and ready. But the headshot had been lead, not silver, and the fleshwitch's wounds were already healing.

"Though if she'd been allowed to simply sink …

"'Well done, Joaquin,' Reyne gasped, dragging a brine-soaked braid from her face.

"The lad only nodded, too exhausted for words, managing a weary smile as folk thumped his back and Elaina slobbered all over his face. Phoebe coughed red, rolling onto her belly, blood drooling from her ruptured eye as she groaned.

"'F-fer a lily-white N-N-Nordish cunt…'

"The houndboy grinned, patted Phoebe on her shoulders. Though near hidden beneath her sopping curls, the fleshwitch's animal gaze drifted to me.

"'My thanks, maebh'lair,' she growled.

"'You are welcome, fleshwitch.'

"Sighing relief, Dior rose on shaking legs, looking at the blood-washed deck around her. Our maiden battle had been glorious, and our victory not too costly. But all knew our war had barely begun.

"'She knew you.'

"It was Reyne who spoke, peering into the churning waves.

"'That Voss who escaped into the water. She knew who you were.'

"Dior nodded, eyes to the east now. 'Her name is Roisin. Roisin the Red. She was one of Danton's hounds. Gabe, Celene, and I fought her on the Mère last year.'

"'She fled when the Beast of Vellene was slain,' we said, joining the Grail at the gunwale. 'We supposed Fabién would have slain her for her failure.'

"*'Nay.'*

"All eyes turned toward Maryn as she spoke, no few shivering at the sight. A child, porcelain skin and pretty dress, soaked through with the blood of her uncounted victims.

"*'Liar. Apostate. Black-hearted servant of the Pit. All these, Fabién Voss surely be. But highblooded Ironhearts be not so many he would cast them away in a fit of pique. If there be any currency 'pon this earth that bloody tyrant weighs dear, it be family.'*

"'And she's on her way to tell him,' Dior whispered. 'That I'm here.'

"'He may already know,' we replied. 'Fabién can ride the minds of his servants if he has a will to. Who can say if he wasn't watching us this morn?'

"Maryn nodded, eyes hard and cold. '*We should sail with all speed for Augustin.*'

"Capitaine á Connell glanced to the heavens then, roiling dark and grim.

"'There's a storm coming.'

"But Mother Maryn only smiled.

"*'We* are *the storm.'*

"The order was given, hasty repairs conducted, the *Seeker* shredded bone-deep by the Voss guns. Limping across the churning waves, we sliced eastward, ever eastward. The mists thinned before us, daysdeath sun creeping higher, and through the veil ahead, after months at sea, we finally, *blessedly* spied our destination.

"Reyne took Dior's hand, whispering in the grey.

"'Elidaen…'

"The fabled homeland of the Augustin dynasty. After so long spent questing for it, it was a grim place to arrive at in truth; whitecaps gnawing dark cliffs, shale shores still crusted with grey frost. Summer yet lingered, brief autumn not even upon us, but it seemed Elidaen's snows were somehow not full melted, and the gale off that coast was a beast, all icy claws and frozen teeth. But a cheer went up across *Seeker*'s decks nevertheless, our drumbeat doubling pace, oars slicing the water like knives.

"'What's that?' Dior asked.

"Excitement faded as the Grail's question was repeated among the men. We saw lights in the mists ahead; a pair of flickering, umber glows, so deep they were almost red.

"'Lighthouses?' Joaquin offered.

"'No, M. Marenn.' I shook our head. 'No lighthouses.'

"Dior stopped her pacing, turned toward us. 'Celene?'

"'The Vise. It burns.'

"My words carried in the still, and no cheer could be heard thereafter. Through the mists ahead they rose; the grim silhouettes of clifftop châteaux, guarding the north and south banks of the River Béni, linked by a natural span of stone. This was the fabled Vise of Philippe; the coastal fortresses Elidaen's seventeenth Emperor had constructed to protect his capital's southern flank. But as the *Seeker* cut through spray and chop, the scent of death rose above the reek of sulfur snows and brine, and all saw the once-towering ramparts of the Vise were toppled, stones blacked by a few still-burning fires, those mighty fortresses reduced to naught but gutted shells.

"'Sweet Mothermoons,' Phoebe breathed. 'Look at *that…'*

"Grim murmurs rippled over the decks, the Unbound glancing to each other with fearful eyes. As we rowed toward the Béni's mouth we saw shapes rising from the waters like the hands of drowned mariners. *Masts,* we realized. Masts by the dozen; the wreckage of great ships, smashed and scattered across the bottom of the bay, shredded sails draped like shrouds across the corpses littering their decks. Upon the canvas we saw the unicorn and five crossed swords of House Augustin, and the grim white ravens of Blood Voss.

"'What the hell happened here?' Joaquin whispered.

"'The Sapphire Host.' Capitaine á Connell made the sign of the wheel. 'Emperor Alexandre's fleet. The grandest navy this world has ever known. It's *gone.*'

"'Voss paid a heavy price for it,' Reyne murmured, nodding to the raven sails.

"'I wager he judges it fair,' the capitaine said, glancing to the smashed forts above.

"'And the capital?' Joaquin asked.

"Á Connell only shook his head then, as clueless as the next man.

"All looked to Dior, standing grim and pale upon the aftcastle. Her eyes were fixed on the shoreline, the *Seeker* slicing ever closer to the mouth of the Béni. None knew what we would find waiting for us up that river now. A city under siege? A capital in ruins? A Forever King already seated on the Fivefold Throne?

"We followed her eyeline, and among the shattered timbers and mangled corpses, we saw a pale shape, wading through the brine. A boy, I realized. Not a day older than twelve, he was. Sopping sailor's garb hung on his body—knee-length britches and a neckerchief of Elidaeni yellow. He was bloated from his time in the water, moving through the shallows with the stumbling gait of the too-long dead. We watched him sink to his knees, latching hold of another dead sailor and digging his teeth into waterlogged flesh. But as we sailed past, that deadboy lifted his mouth from his feast, rancid blood drooling from needle fangs, staring at Dior.

"He raised one hand, as if reaching for the Grail. Dior lifted her wounded hand in kind. That hand that had healed the sick. Saved the dying. The Red Hand of God.

"And there in that chill and bloody dawn, the deadboy *screamed.*

"God Almighty, it was an awful sound. Earsplitting. Heartbreaking. Its chill washing *Dawnseeker*'s decks and soaking every soul through. It was as if this boy somehow knew—in the rot-riddled, waterlogged part of his brain that knew anything at all—that despite all the hurts she had healed, all the lives she had saved, she could not save *him.*

"Not a day older than twelve, he was.

"Dior clenched her jaw then. Balling wounded fingers into a fist.

"'Sail on, Capitaine.'

"And so we did. Through that corpse-thick mouth and into the waters of the Béni beyond. The was no talk now aboard *Dawnseeker*; each man gripped with the sights they'd just seen, wondering what awaited upriver. The wind was cold as death, and that struck us strange; for though grim summer reigned in Elidaen now, the frosts along the Béni's shoreline were unmelted, dead trees adorned with chandeliers of ice. Heavy *thump*ing rang out as we sliced upriver—the song of ice, now crashing against our hull. There was no scent of rot in the air. No stink of corpses unearthed or moldering fungus snarls. Just the faint reek of sulfur, rising now with the scent of …

"'Smoke,' Phoebe growled.

"The wind was become a monster, howling and wild, the Unbound turning bewildered eyes to the heavens. Snow began falling then; *snow,* as if summer had been only a dream. We skimmed past watchtowers and guardposts, gutted and fallen. Fishertowns razed to the ground. A desolation, the ice floes growing thicker, snows heavier.

"*'D-Dior…'*

"The Grail turned as we spoke, struck by the pain in our voice. Her eyes grew wide as we raised one shaking hand, thin wisps of smoke rising from our skin.

"'Shit,' she breathed. 'The water?'

"Maryn nodded, glancing over the gunwale. '*It grows fresh, holy child.*'

"'Go. We'll make landfall soon as we can.'

"We did as she bid, making our way down to the maindeck, past wide-eyed Unbound. Our coffins had been brought up from below, Maryn's marble angel laid out beside the heavy pinewood box I'd kept in the hold; we'd no wish to be trapped belowdecks if *Dawnseeker* was sunk. The pain was growing; fire in our skin and fear in our bones, and such was the river's power, we could not even leave our moth behind to watch in our stead. Maryn nodded to me as she climbed inside her sarcophagus, and skin blistering, eyes bleeding, I sank into ours. With shaking hands we dragged the lid closed, cold earth beneath us and rough timber all around, whispering thanks to God as the pain began to ease.

"But the fear remained.

"We were not totally senseless, able still to smell, to hear; the oncoming scent of scorched timber and burning flesh, the faint song of steel and storm and screams. Thickening ice crashing on the hull, onward through that red perfume we came, the wind howling fury, and above that soulless wail we heard a shout from the aftcastle.

"'Augustin!' Joaquin roared. '*Augustin!* '

"A cry of joy rang out in answer, after so long at sea to have finally reached her. But soon came cries of dismay, whispered curses and prayers. The battlesong grew louder, the stench of butchery rising, and we clenched our fists, helpless inside our little wooden box, no idea what we approached, or what approached us.

"Cannon rang out, timbers shattering, *Dawnseeker* shaking. We heard Dior roar, screams of pain, cries of '*Sails starboard!* ', *Seeker*'s guns howling and bigger dogs barking in reply. Timbers smashed, rigging split, men cried out in agony, and we moaned along with them. All I had done, all I had given, and there I was, useless and worthless. Those moments were the hardest of my whole war, I think. Those muted minutes that seemed like *years*. Trapped in that box like a worm, blind, powerless, reminded once more of what I truly was.

"Not blessed, but damned.

"The crash, the cries, the hymn of singing steel grew louder. And beneath it all, we could smell it; such a flood of blood it must have been a river. Higher, deeper, sharper but no less vast, rose the stench of a charnel house, the stink of death so thick and ripe it seemed to swallow us whole. And I knew what it was we smelled then.

"Wretched.

"Wretched in such numbers they might make this whole world a grave.

"Cannon barked again, wood split and canvas tore. '*Prepare to repel!* ' came the roar, and I prayed God for strength to see this through. Above the din, the clamor, the riot, we heard Dior cry out, our skin tingling at the sound.

"'Courage now! God stand with u—'

"And then came a crash, thunderous and sharp. The crack of a hundred timber ribs, the boom of a breaking spine. Something struck *Seeker*'s starboard, and I felt our coffin wrenched sideways, suddenly weightless. I had the presence of mind to dig our claws into the lid to stop it flying loose, and then I myself was flying; me and my little pine box, tumbling through the air like a child's toy. We screamed then, knowing where we were headed—the river, oh holy God, the *RIVER*—helpless now but to pray. And then we struck the water, the world turned end over end. The voices within me cried out, all of them in terror, Wulfric loudest of all; to have given so much, to have come so far, only to fall here at the last.

"Water rushed into our coffin, swift and shockingly cold.

"With our last breath, we cried out to God above.

“And down, down into the dark we sank.”

XV

BLEED FOR ME

"WELL." JEAN-FRANÇOIS CLEARED his throat, dipping his quill. "Shit?"

The Last Liathe looked across the river, pale lips curled.

"A poet as well as a historian. You are a creature of many talents, Marquis."

"Have a care, Mlle Castia." The vampire glanced meaningfully to his thralls, still standing with torches at the ready. "This conversation has been rather pleasant thus far, all things considered. I would hate for it to end in tears. Or screams."

The Last Liathe smiled.

"I would certainly prefer one to the other."

"How is it you survived?" the historian demanded. "Immersion in fresh running water spells doom to any of our kind, Ironheart or otherwise."

"We were still inside our coffin." Celene shrugged, black eyes on the rushing flows between them. "We kith can cross rivers in them. It seems we can also be *sunk* in them. A technicality I suppose, but one we weren't about to take umbrage with. Still, as those waters flooded in and the dark swallowed us, the notion we'd not been destroyed brought little comfort. We might be safe inside our coffin, but we certainly couldn't *leave* it. And as it thumped to rest on the bottom of the Béni, we knew sure and true we were trapped.

"That thought would've been terrifying enough, but worse was the knowledge that battle still raged overhead, and we'd no way to aid Dior. I'd no clue how deep we'd sunk, but we'd fallen *far*. And though we could hear muted cannon, screams, we'd no idea what was happening, save that the fate of the world and every soul therein hung in the balance.

"And there we lay. Completely, utterly helpless.

"*Fool.*

"His voice echoed in my head; mentor, master, monster.

"'*Not now, Wulfric,*' I hissed.

"*If not now, then when?*

"The demand rang in my dark, within my skull. And though my body was yet sunk in that watery tomb, I felt the walls about me rippling.

"Ground shifting beneath my feet.

"All about me unmade …

"I cannot say if it was Wulfric working his gifts. A product of my own fear? Delusion or illusion or something in between? But I found myself standing in the heart of a vast room then. A room wrought only of my mind. The walls were circular, like some great cathedral, all panes of glittering silver—a thousand looking glasses, a thousand mirrors.

"And staring back from each bright surface, I saw his snarling face.

"'*How long 'til thou shalt admit this be beyond thee?* ' he demanded.

"'*Never,*' I replied.

"'*How many different ways canst thou find to fail?* '

"'*Our measure be not in how many times we stumble. But how oft we rise.*'

"'*And how shall ye rise from this?* ' he hissed, seething against the glass around me. '*Shall we wait down here for these timbers to rot and the flesh to wash from our bones?* '

"He slammed his fists against those mirrors, the glass rippling as he pounded upon them. But afraid as I was, as sad as I felt at what we'd become, I stood tall against him.

"'*My bones. My body. I* beat *you.*'

"'*Ye betrayed me.*'

"'*No more than you did me. And I am sorry for it. But* I *am master now.*'

"Wulfric retreated, sinking back beyond those silvered surfaces. But another voice rang out in that cathedral of my mind then, black and boiling with hate.

"'*Thou art master of nothing.*'

"I sighed, turning now toward the newcomer rising in the mirrors at my back.

"'*Prince Aléne. How gracious of you to join us.*'

"The Terror stared at me from beyond the reflections; one more soul among my choir. Her eyes were an empty eternity, her thoughts cold as a lifetime unloved.

"'*My father shall make a ruin of thy dreams, child. And when his gaze falls 'pon thee, the whelp who slew his daughter, there shall be hell to p—*'

"'*Be silent, cur,*' Wulfric hissed, knuckles pounding now on the mirrors opposite Aléne's. '*Thou hast no call to speak here. Go back to the dark where ye belong.*'

"'*Name me cur?* ' Aléne laughed. '*Ye, who fled Charbourg's fall?* '

"'*Cur and more. Dogsbody. Lickspittle. Catspaw of the Pit.*'

"'*Ah, dear Wulfric.*' The Terror tilted her head, smiling sharp and wicked. '*How feeble thy flame. How worthless thy rage. Thee and thy Faithless sought to drink the whole world dry. What irony, to find thee drunk down here beside me.*'

"'*Be quiet. Both of you.*'

"Silence fell as I spat the command, but sadly, it lasted not long. Another face shivered into focus among those mirrors, another voice rising in this cathedral of my soul—Dmitri Dyvok, somber, soft, whining as always. 'This *is how it ends?* '

"'*God in heaven, cease thy bleating, will ye?* ' Wulfric spat.

"'*… Or what?* '

"'*Be silent, the pair of thee,*' Aléne spat.

"'*Apologies, madame, was someone speaking to you?* '

"'*Take no tone with me, whelp. I am thy elder and thy—*'

"More faces rippled into focus on the silver then, more voices rising in the quiet; a tumult swelling in that vast room, in that black tomb below the water, pounding upon the silver and threatening to overwhelm all I was.

"'*It can't end like this, can it? God, not after all we've done?* '

"'*I'll not go quiet into that long dark, I vow it.*'

"'*Ill-bred, goat-swivving whorespawn. Were we flesh, I would flay the—*'

"'*Well, we're not flesh, are we? So would you all kindly shut your bloody—*'

"'*BE SILENT!* '

"My roar rang in the dark, mirrors shivering. And though there were many souls in that dreadful choir, the cathedral they sang inside was *me*. The babble stilled, the mirrors emptied of accusing faces, quiet reigning inside my skull. And in that hush, upon those silver panes, a single face blurred into being, framed by curls of golden blond.

"'*Are we going to die?* ' Victorine whispered.

"'*Probably.*'

"'*… Will we go to hell?* '

"I sighed then. Not enough left in me to lie.

"'*Definitely.*'

"The coffin rocked, a *thump* shaking the frame about us. Terror filled us then; the thought the box might break, nothing between us and the river left. But another thump sounded, harder, followed by a water-muted voice, and we felt ourselves being lifted, rising, *rising* up out of that hellish dark. The voices within me were suddenly a tumult again; relief, elation, a shapeless babbling filling the cathedral of our skull. Bright light split our darkness then, that room of mirrors about us shattering as our coffin was upended, spilling us and a wash of freezing water onto a snow-clad shore.

“Rough hands hauled us upright, our heart twisting as we recognized him in the smoke-washed light.

“‘Joaquin…’

“The lad nodded, pale and grim. His hound Elaina ran in circles, barking her distress. Joaquin was soaked, lips and fingernails gone blue from the river’s chill, but still …

“‘You saved us.’

“‘Thank me later, Mlle Castia. The Grail needs you now.’

“Mention of Dior shook the last trace of bewilderment from our bones. And dragging a curtain of sopping hair from our eyes, we looked about the shore on which we stood, the shattered piers and jetties, realizing at last where we were.

“‘God be praised…’ we breathed.

“A vast metropolis, breathtaking in scope. We could see Rive Sud across the ice-clad river; a mighty industrial hearth retching smoke into the sky. We stood on the banks of Rive Nord, home to the city’s commonfolk, the salt of its earth. And in the center, on a great island in the middle of the Béni’s frozen floes, stood Rive Cœur, the capital’s beating heart. Atop impregnable cliffs it loomed; towering ramparts of white stone, miles in the measuring. Past those ancient battlements, we could see the goldglass spires of the famed Cathédrale de Lumière, the towers of Château Impérial. *This* was great Augustin, the heart and soul of imperial power on earth. But though these walls had stood since before San Maximille waged his war for unification, before his sons and grandsons forged his Fivefold Throne, we could see through the swirling mists and smoke …

“‘This whole city’s *fucked,*’ Joaquin said.

“The houndboy spoke true. Through the falling snows, we spotted fires raging through Rive Nord; at least part of the ancient metropolis ablaze. Rive Sud had been utterly decimated, its mighty port razed to the still-frozen waterline. All but one of the great bridges linking Rive Cœur to the riverbanks had been demolished—blasted into splintered rubble by what must have been the fists of God himself. Alone that bridge stood—a great span of pale stone and broad arches, the last link from Rive Cœur to our northern shore.

“The only way left into the city center.

“Black smoke snaked upward to the heavens, and though the sun had not yet set, the whole metropolis was shrouded in dark and chill deep as night. But through the mist and frost, the sprawl of portside buildings about us, we could see running figures, hear the faint song of steel and the screams of dying men. Battle raged on this northern shore, a great force, pallid and bloodless and rotten, pressing through the streets toward that last bridge, and from there to the capital’s heart.

"'Seven Martyrs…' we breathed.

"Vampires.

"Vampires in numbers we'd never *dreamed.*

"*'Joaquin, I found her! '*

"We turned at the cry, saw one of the four Callums surfacing from the Béni, red hair plastered to his cheeks as he cried out, 'The wee one's coffin, it's down here!'

"'Dior sent us to find you both,' Joaquin said, turning to me. 'She fights with Phoebe and the rest, battling toward the bridge. But the Dead seem endless, and if they reach the gatehouse before we do…'

"'We'll be cut off.' We clenched our jaw, digging fingernails into our palms and letting the red flow. 'Fetch Mother Maryn, brave Joaquin. I will aid the Grail.'

"The houndboy nodded, wading out toward Callum. With no backward glance, we dashed across the shattered piers and into a tangle of narrow streets. We could hear Dior's voice faintly above a choir of steel and screams, our boots slipping in new-fallen snow and sticky red sludge. Blood washed the cobbles beneath our feet, the alleys and thoroughfares we ran through choked with corpses. I was off-balance, uncertain, plunged into a battle already halfway fought; no true understanding of its shape. I knew only that the Grail was in the thick of it, and so, into that thick we plunged.

"Those next hours were chaos, Historian. I do not truly have words to encompass all I saw and did. When we'd fought the battle of Dún Maergenn, all had been carnage and savage, deafening motion, but the battlelines at least had been clear—our troops crashing inward against the defending Dyvok, the Voss legions crashing against *us* from behind. But that red afternoon in Rive Nord, there were no lines at all.

"The streets were twisted, the tenements tall; all the better to prevent an invading force from keeping its bearings. And only a block from the river's edge, every one of those streets was simply flooded—brave men in the golden tabards of Alexandre III, cityfolk fleeing for their lives, and a horde of wretched such as we had never seen.

"Their number seemed *impossible.* An endless rotten river, crashing through the alleys, tumbling and scrabbling and flinging themselves across the rooftops. No order, no rhyme, no reason to it at all there seemed at first. No neat rows of men and orderly sallies into the fray. Just masses of bodies, smashing and crashing and flailing against each other, claws tearing and fangs piercing and fires blazing, snatches of scripture rising above the screams and flashes of silver light piercing the gloom. And blood, Marquis.

"God in heaven, *so* much blood.

"We flung ourselves up to the rooftops, among the tumbling Dead, the stench of rot and gore and smoke so thick we could have clawed the air and seen our fingernails turn black. Fighting our way uphill, we battled as much against the defenders as attackers—Alexandre's men had no idea I was a friend, after all. Our body was pierced by shots of burning silver, our hair set ablaze by flaming crossbow bolts. Smoke burned our eyes and sparks scorched our skin, our bloody blade carving through acres and acres of Dead meat.

"The wretched we slew were of every shape and size; young and old, men and women and children, some so rotten they could barely walk, others fresh enough to be near highblooded. We had never dreamed of a battle so vast, so terrifying. We'd witnessed the aftermath of the Blackheart's attack on Dún Maergenn; those ancient walls smashed to rubble by the Dyvok's unholy might. But the strength of the Voss lay in the iron of their skin, and the steel of their *minds*. And the deeper we carved our way into that abattoir, that butchery, that ceaseless, ravenous maw of war, the more afraid I became."

The Last Liathe fell silent, black eyes on dark waters. As was often the case, Jean-François had found himself caught up in the battle, quill flowing swift as Celene spoke. But quiet rang out now, punctured only by the river's rush, and he glanced up, brow arched.

"Of what were you afraid, Mlle Castia?"

Still Celene was mute. Her legs were crossed beneath her upon the oily stone, elbows on her knees, fingers steepled at her lips. She seemed a statue then—some monstrous masterpiece of alabaster and ink, and though she was silent, Jean-François wondered if she was speaking to the ones inside her head.

"Mlle Cast—"

"My grandfather was a genius. It pains me to say it. But Fabién Voss may have been the most innovative military mind this world has known. In nights before the death of days, to give birth to a wretched was a source of shame in kith society. And more, danger. We dwelled in secret, after all. And siring a malformed idiot incapable of understanding anything but hunger could only invite peril to one's door. Wretched were simply killed when they rose. An inconvenience, an *embarrassment,* an unfortunate but inevitable side effect of the vampiric condition.

"But when their numbers swelled after the daystar failed, it was Fabién who first saw their utility. And it was Fabién who ever used them to greatest effect. Foulbloods are idiot creatures, you see. They go where the food is, they cower before kith older and stronger, but most lack the intellect to understand complex commands. Even after my grandfather's successes in Nordlund, bloodlords of the other lines still used them as simple shock troops. Fodder for the cannon, and grist for the mill. But through their gifts, the Voss can speak directly to a wretched's *mind,* Historian. Not only can they issue orders even the most decayed foulblood can comprehend, they can do so telepathically over the battlefield. And carving our way uphill through that chaos, we began to realize it was not *chaos* at all, but a dreadful, screaming, bloody ballet, directed by hidden and all-seeing hands.

"There were highbloods among the wretched horde. Pale figures with eyes of steel and skins of iron. They did not fight unless pressed, preferring to let the foulbloods do their killing. But they were ever present among the wretched mobs; sending them forward and drawing them back, feinting and flanking, baiting and butchering, driven by an intellect no single kith could muster. Looking at the picture entire from above, we saw the wretched were moving like the great flocks of swallows I'd seen as a little girl; wheeling and rolling and slicing through the skies above our village. And we realized each highblood was a single strand in a vast web, a single stitch in a great telepathic tapestry, a single string in a grand and awful orchestra that was playing a requiem for the world.

"And I knew the conductor writing the tune.

"'Hold! Hold here!'

"The familiar voice rose above the bedlam ahead, setting our heart singing.

"'HOLD THE LINE, BROTHERS!'

"Leaping across the rooftops, we cut through a gaggle of foulbloods. And dashing across the snow-clad tiles, we looked down to the blood-washed cobbles below.

"A little square; the meeting of four twisted city roads, each blockaded with hasty timbers or wearied men. Their bloody tabards were chalked with the Grail's sigil, or the unicorn and swords of Emperor Alexandre. Abandoned tenements loomed high all about them, a stone fountain that might once have been Angel Sanael stood at the square's heart, now smashed to pieces. And next to that broken angel, flanked by the fleshwitch Dúnnsair and her pretty Princess Reyne, we saw …

"*'Dior! '*

"The Grail was knelt beside a fallen soldier in the Emperor's golden livery. In one hand, she held a bloody dagger, and her other was pressed to his savaged throat. But as we called, she looked up, blue eyes shining in a mask of blood and ash.

"'Celene!'

"'What are you doing?'

"'Oh, quick round of ale and whores before mass, what's it fucking look like?'

"'I mean why are you pressing forward? You're surrounded on all si—'

"'We have to reach the bridge! The garrison has orders to blow it if it looks to be overrun! If that span falls, we've no way into Rive Cœur!'

"'Blow it…'

"We looked over the high rooftops, through the smoke and snow and into battle's thick. The Emperor's troops were fighting bravely, the light of burning wheels held aloft by battlepriests cutting through the gloom, flame and silver slicing through the Dead tide. But still, they were being pressed back uphill, relentless, toward the great stone gatekeep guarding entry to that last bridge. From our vantage, we could see men at work *behind* those gates now; thick cables of hempknot snaking down the supports. Strapped beneath the arches, we saw barrels, bound with yet more hempknot. And at last, the understanding of what had smashed Augustin's other bridges to pieces washed over us like cold water.

"Not the fists of God, but …

"'Black ignis,' we whispered.

"We saw the wisdom of it. The dreadful dilemma too. If the defenders of Augustin destroyed the last bridge into the city before the Endless Legion breached those gates, they could cut off the Forever King's only way into Rive Cœur. But they would also be cutting off the last way *out* of the city, and any chance of their own escape …

"'They've been fighting three days to hold it!' Dior cried. 'If they're forced to destroy it, Augustin will be completely cut off, we have to *help* them!'

"The soldier Dior had laid bloody hands upon rose from the snow, staring up at her in bewilderment. He was short and crook-eyed, barely more than a boy, his hauberk and sword still fresh from the forge. Looking closer, we saw dozens of new faces among her cohort; most were clad in bloody tabards of the Emperor's gold, but there was no shortage of civilians either. Dior had obviously been fighting her way through the bloody streets toward the last bridge—a blind, stumbling stab through the chaos before all hope was lost. But she'd still taken the time to rescue any innocent she could find along the way, dragging them back from death's clutches with her own red hand.

"*God, what a marvel she was …*

"'Where the bleeding *fuck* is Maryn?' she roared. 'We're cunt-deep in wretched!'

"'Joaquin found her! She is coming!'

"'Well, we can't wait! Dusk is closing in, and they'll be twice as strong after nightfall! These streets are a fucking maze, we can't see shit down here. Can you show us the way?'

"'Always.'

"Dior rose to her feet, gazing at the soldiers around her. The fire in her burned with a brightness we'd never seen; as if all that endless, restless energy she'd harbored those months at sea had at last been unleashed in the coming dusk. But the men around her were torn, bruised, battered near to exhaustion. Most had already used the blood she'd given them, draining the vials about their throats to keep themselves upright.

"'Hear me now!' she cried. 'I know you're tired, you're bleeding, you're ready to fall! But I ask nothing of you I won't give myself! One last breath! One last drop! For all you hold dear, fight with me now, and let no man or woman here sheathe their blade 'til we reach those fucking gates!'

"The Grail raised her dagger, still wet with her own blood, and gazed at the warriors about her. She was streaked in gore and ash, but her beauty still struck us to our heart. A daughter of heaven she was, the blood of God's own son in her veins, and there in Rive Nord, as the sun slunk lower toward that endless horizon, as the doom of this whole world gathered its cloaks about us, one girl stood tall against that bitterbleak dark.

"And she told it *No*.

"'As I bleed for you, bleed for me!'

"'San Dior!' came the roar in reply. 'FOR THE GRAIL!'

"The breakout began, Unbound stabbing through the alley mouth onto a blood-soaked thoroughfare. We led as best we could through that maddening maze, dashing across rooftops, skipping over alleymouths, seeking the swiftest path to the bridge. Capitaine á Connell fought in the vanguard, Phoebe at his flank, claws dripping blood. Dior stood in the heart of the push, Reyne beside her, but as her men slashed at the Dead with their stolen silversteel, the Scion of Heaven drew no blood save her own. They would fall, her Unbound, her sworn, her tiny legion—strong as thralls, but in the end, just as mortal as any other man. But as they fell, their comrades would push forward, ever *forward,* leaving the wounded in their wake. And Dior would kneel beside those fallen men, slicing her palm and laying bloody hands upon them.

"There was something beautiful about that. Something *pure*. That even in the midst of this brutality, this crashing, roiling, reeking machine of carnage, Dior Lachance took no life. She only gave it. *Saved* it. Smiling as the light returned to her men's eyes, hauling them to their feet and kissing their brows, hale and whole once more.

"She was not destruction, but salvation.

"Not an ending, but a beginning.

"The one true hope of this world."

Celene hung her head, dragging a lock of ink-black from her unmarred cheek.

"But the cruelest angel in God's legion is not Mahné nor Phaedra nor Sarai. It is Fortuna, Marquis. Grim Lady Chance. And as we led Dior's fighters out into a wide crossroads, at last within sight of that final bridge, the angel turned her back on us.

"The crossroad was called Place San Antoine. It was named for the Third Martyr, a lowly monk who led a band of persecuted believers out of Sūdhaem by parting the Bay of Tempests—later renamed in his honor. And looking about his square that day, the sun creeping ever closer to its rest, we could not help but laugh at the irony.

"A *sea* of wretched filled that square, Marquis. Soldiers and bakers and farmers and fletchers, all dragged into the hell of forever. They wore tattered rags or rent mail, dripping with the blood of Augustin's slain. A gore-soaked, reeking ocean of vampires.

“And at their heart, astride a great black stallion, a highblood sat.

“There were other Ironhearts about the square—strands in the Forever King’s great tapestry. But she was the one we saw first. She was tall, pale as winter’s cloak, dreadful as the dark before dawn. Her cheeks and the hollows of her eyes were daubed with blood, so her face resembled a death’s-head. Black hair was bound in braids long enough to touch her waist. And her eyes … oh *God,* those eyes. Eyes that had seen years in their hundreds and murders in their thousands. Cruel and hard and utterly bereft of soul.

“The eyes of a Prince of Forever.

“Four vampire knights sat beside her on thralled horses, and all wore suits of dark plate armor. Skulls adorned every surface, and the Prince bore a scythe of that same dark steel, sharp and cruel and twice as long as a man; the same borne by Mahné, Angel of Death. And so she must have seemed to the mortal men she fought—not a daughter of Forever, but of Death himself, come to sow red ruin among them. Her mighty black steed was decked in barding of the same design, and turning toward our tiny band, the vampire stared across that rolling ocean of corpses, midnight gaze falling like hammers on Dior.

“As she blinked, we saw another set of eyes painted upon her lids in fresh blood. And she whispered then, her smile as bleak as the ending of the world.

“*‘Lachance.’*”

XVI

DUSKFALL

“‘FUCK,’ DIOR WHISPERED.

“‘Fuck,’ Phoebe hissed.

“‘*Fuuuuck,*’ we sighed.

“The vampire stared across the battleground, smile spreading across her lips like a slick of poison, wheeling her stallion about to face us. Dior’s company was already beset on all sides, but the attentions of this monster had brought the Grail herself to a standstill. Dior clutched her dagger, her bold Ossian Princess beside her, bloody silversteel in the Princess á Maergenn’s hands. We heard the fear in Reyne’s voice as she whispered.

“‘Who in God’s name is that?’

“‘The Iron M-Maiden.’

“The boy soldier Dior had saved was speaking, crook-eyes on the vampires.

“‘Kestrel Voss,’ he continued, signing the wheel. ‘Daughter of the F-Forever King and commander of his legions. T-ten thousand men have died on ’er blade.’

“Reyne clenched her jaw, silversteel raised. ‘Fortunate we’re not men.’

“‘’Ware!’ Phoebe cried, looking about. ‘’ Ware ye, now! Shields up! Be ready!’

“Fire was streaming overhead—burning blasts flung from the gatekeep. The air rang with silvershot, dying screams, the crash of the Dead against ancient walls. The Voss had no siege weapons, and we saw the wretched were simply throwing themselves en masse at the gatehouse, a tide of rotten flesh clawing up the stonework with the unholy strength of the Dead. And though Augustin's soldiers fought bravely, desperate to defend their last road out of the city, we knew they'd soon be overrun. If they blew the bridge before we crossed, we'd be trapped here. Little chance of retreat, and none of surrender.

"'*Dior Lachance!* '

"The cry rang over Place San Antoine, and though the battle at the gates raged on, the wretched pressing us fell eerily still. Kestrel Voss stared across the square at our little column, black braids framing a face of alabaster, daubed in blood like Death's own. She was beautiful, terrible, iron and marble. Rumor had it Kestrel was the last daughter of the Tordu—a barbarous folk from the Elidaeni Mountains who drank from the skulls of their neighbors, and threw their children into pits to fight for the right to adulthood with knives of bone. She was ancien, puissant, a creature older than any in this city. But as she blinked, again we saw those bloody eyes painted upon her own.

"'*My dread and noble father bids thee greetings joyous, child! And unto thee, I give thanks heartfelt! Brothers and sisters three hath I lost aready in my King's quest to own thee. A trio of Princes—Danton, Alba, sweet Aléne—all slain for the wanting of thee. I feared my cup should runneth dry of siblings afore ever I laid mine eyes 'pon thee. How gen'rous, that at the last, thou hast journeyed here to kneel at my feet.*'

"That scythe spun in the Iron Maiden's hand, leveled at Dior.

"'*Lay thy blade 'pon this bloodied earth, child, and bend thy knee afore me. In kind, I shall spare thy cohort righteous slaughter for the murder of my kinsmen, and spirit thee hence to my father's side. A black crown shall he place 'pon thy brow, Dior.*'

"That cold smile deepened further, chill hung thick in the air.

"'*The Forever King himself shall bow to thee.*'

"'Nae fear, Flower,' Phoebe hissed. 'We stand with ye until the end.'

"'*O sightless kit,*' the Maiden replied. '*O ruin'd dahtr of weald and wild, know ye not, what now ye behold?* '

"Kestrel took in the carnage with a sweep of her hand.

"'*This* be *the end.*'

"Dior clenched her jaw, and looking that Prince of Forever in the eye, she spat upon the earth. '*Dead tongues heeded are Dead tongues tasted.*'

"The Maiden's smile vanished, like hope upon the pyre.

"And raising her scythe, she saluted.

"'*So be it.*'

"It began as a tremor, like an itch on the back of the eyes. A voice on the very edge of hearing. But it *grew,* hissing to whispering to murmuring, and with those murmurs came a chill, trickling outward through the veins until it was all you could feel. We saw it striking the younger among Dior's company first, but it spread as flame on tinder. We'd felt the same once before—that terrible red day we fought the Terrors at Dún Maergenn. And in the wake of those dreadful whispers came an awful rush of fear.

"'She's in my *head!*' someone cried.

"Another man yelled, 'Get out, get OUT, *DEVIL!*', fists to his temples. A lad among the soldiers wailed and sank to his knees, followed by dozens more. Kestrel was in their minds—in *ours* too—her powers amplified among that web of Ironhearts. And in our skulls echoed that dread maiden's voice, speaking in dulcet tones of secrets kept and sins hidden and failures unreckoned with, the dreadful summation of all our mortal fears.

"*All thou hast given,* she told me. *All thou hast sacrificed. All the blood spilled and lies woven and lives stolen. In the end, it shall never be enough, Celene Castia.*

"She shook her head, black eyes boring into my soul.

"Ye *shall never be enough.*"

There on the shores of a black river, deep in the bowels of Sul Adair, the Last Liathe heaved a sigh that seemed to come from the very soles of her boots.

"And then the Voss charged," she declared.

"Of all her cohort, only Dior was unaffected by the Iron Maiden's power. Yet, though many of the civilians and soldiers she'd rescued broke at the sight of those charging Ironhearts, her Unbound held firm. They were not unafeared, to be certain—many was the man who blanched at the sight of that oncoming doom. But by some spell of the Grail's holy blood, as those vampires rushed headlong across the square, steeds frothing and hooves thundering and blades gleaming, Dior's soldiers stood their ground."

Celene shook her head.

"For all the good it did them.

"That ocean of wretched would have been battle enough, but a cavalry charge from highblooded Ironhearts was a peril none were prepared for. A few Unbound had spears, set swiftly against those oncoming steeds. But with the wretched crashing all around them, it was hard to hold any kind of formation, and heedless of her own Dead troops, Kestrel and her horsemen simply plowed through the foulbloods and into Dior's line, shattering it like glass. Men screamed and bones splintered, armor was rent to ruin, mail ringlets and blood glittering like diamonds and rubies as they spun through the snow-struck air.

"We were not without answer. Though the fleshwitch Dúnnsair was not counted among my dearest friends, she was not without skill in battle. Dusk was near now, the beast within the 'dancer never closer to her surface, and among those vampires, the fleshwitch *flew*. Though an Ironheart's flesh will turn ordinary steel, the talons of a duskdancer are as much a bane to our kind as fire and silver. And I tell you, that day in Augustin, Phoebe á Dúnnsair was murder incarnate. Eyes of golden fire and talons of razored bone.

“We charged also, flinging ourselves onto a dark knight’s steed and bringing him down into the snow. We could hear Kestrel’s awful scythe, reaping Dior’s men like wheat, but we were in no position to stop her. Our foe was a powerhouse, steeled by the weight of centuries. Our bloodblade shattered upon his skin, but not before we took his swordhand at the wrist, shearing through plate and bone. He tore our scarf away, a great gauntleted fist closing around our face. But our hands found his throat then, voices within us singing their fury and fear, and unleashing the arte within us, we set the blood boiling in his veins.

“The battle raged around us, men screaming, foulbloods falling, Dior roaring for us to fight on. But there in the red slush, we grappled with that monster alone. His hand crushed our face, our eye popping from its socket. But his veins were afire now, blackened blood boiling into his throat. I know my brother claims we all beg at the end, Marquis. Terrified of hell awaiting. Yet as Mahné finally laid claim my enemy, the Ironheart’s final act upon this earth was not to plead for mercy nor blub for forgiveness, but to spit his last few drops of blood into my face before his body burst into dust.

“We rose amid that slaughter, no joy in our victory. Phoebe had done grim murder upon another highblood, her face and talons greyed with ash. But the price she’d paid was steep, bloody gouges across her body, innards spilling through her fingers as she collided with the third horseman—a pale princeling with long red hair and a cruel scar across his cheeks. Kestrel and her last highblooded comrade had cleaved through the Unbound like razors, and the ground was littered with the dead and dying. Sherrods and Derricks and Callums—Dior knew them all by name. And we could see her anguish as they fell about her, swarmed by foulbloods or simply swept aside by that fearsome scythe.

“Ever since that day in the Hall of Plenty, as Maryn told her she’d save this forsaken world, Dior’s belief in herself had been unwavering. But truth was, the Holy Grail of San Michon was a guttersnipe from Lashaame who’d never truly seen the horrors of war. Certainly not close enough to feel the blood. Smell the stink. Hear the screams. And looking about her now, Dior realized the impossible.

“She was *losing.*

“She roared, bloody dagger in hand as more of her men tumbled about her. But much as she cut, deep as she bled, she could only heal the wounded, not resurrect the dead. Phoebe roared warning, but the Iron Maiden was death made flesh, her scythe splitting mail and cleaving bone and parting souls from broken mortal shells. And soon, only two stood between the Grail and that Prince of Forever.

"A Princess of two thrones, Low and High.

"And me."

The Last Liathe drew a deep breath, brushing a dark lock from her lips.

"The sun was sinking. Battle swelling. And in that blood-soaked square, Reyne á Maergenn and I stood, side by side. Though Kestrel's whispers must have filled her mind, the Nineswords' daughter showed no fear. And wearied and wounded though she was, as Kestrel charged across that broken ground, Reyne charged to meet her.

"The Maiden's scythe split the air, but the Princess danced aside, and we burst into pieces as it sheared through our body. But we were already reforming, past the blade's arc—our trick of the eye, our spell of the blood. Though the skin of ancien Voss might be impervious to our blade, her beast's certainly wasn't, Kestrel grunting as we cleaved the stallion's legs from under her and sent all crashing into the snows.

"Kestrel rose from the ruins, smeared with gore. But Reyne was already upon her, and the Maiden soon realized her peril. The Princess's blade was fresh-anointed with the Grail's own holy blood, slicing the air but an inch from Kestrel's throat, severing a braid of hair as the Maiden wove back, snarling, skidding, midnight eyes gone bright and wide.

"'En garde,' Reyne hissed.

"Lunging at her flank, my blade was a blur, a sharp *crack* ringing across the square as it kissed Kestrel's skin, putting a tiny split in her porcelain cheek.

"*'Touché.'*

"Dior watched, dagger in her fist as chaos raged all around her. Reaching into Reyne's mind, I could *feel* her flow, match it with my own, as if the Princess and I played a duet with steel and blood. We fought Kestrel toe-to-toe, and that near, the reach of her scythe was a burden, not a blessing. For a moment, Kestrel looked backfooted. Off-balance.

"But only a moment.

"Though I'd stolen my power, Kestrel had earned hers through centuries on the battlefield. She knew the blood on the Princess's blade was Dior's. She knew I could boil her veins dry. From a mind so fearsome, there was no secret we could hide, no feint she would fall for, no strike she could not see coming—the *thought* of it read before ever it became action. And in a blinking, we realized the folly of facing a warrior such as she.

"Black eyes met ours.

"Black lips curled in a smile.

"Kestrel twisted her weapon, and with a *snak,* the haft cleft in twain; a shortened scythe now in her left hand, a cruel longblade in her right. The Maiden lunged, the scythe descended—too swift, too fierce—past my guard and across my knees. For a moment, I could not understand why I was falling, but then I saw my boots sailing through the air, blood spewing from the stumps she'd left me with. But louder than my own cry was Dior's; heartsick, high, a scream of terror as Kestrel followed through, opening Reyne á Maergenn from sundered crotch all the way to shattered ribs.

"The Princess staggered, mismatched eyes on her love. Dior stepped forward, slicing her palm, lips peeling back from sharpening teeth as she wet her blade.

"But too late.

"Far too late.

"And as dusk finally fell over the city, so too fell Princess Reyne.

"Dior's scream was shapeless, *animal,* more akin to a howl than a wail. Her eyes flooded with tears as she slipped to her knees in the snow, gaze locked on her fallen love, all that *blood*. And fingers curling into claws, she screamed again, so loud it made us *wince*. Rolling onto our belly, scrabbling at red snow, we shouted warning.

"And Kestrel Voss turned upon her prey.

"The Prince of Forever stepped forward, hand outstretched to claim her prize. But she fell motionless, black eyes narrowed as Dior's voice raised up in a third and final scream.

"It was … awful. Ragged and agonized. The Grail held her hands up before her eyes, widening along with our own to see her fingers now tipped with razored *claws*. Her body began to … move without moving. Not walking nor crawling but … bending. *Warping*. She threw back her head, screaming still, and we saw her teeth were grown long and sharp, limbs buckling, spine arching, ashen hair no longer simply spilling about her tearstained cheeks but erupting from her skin. With a final dreadful crackling, the rending of mail and splitting of seams, her scream indeed became a howl. And where a moment before had knelt a helpless, wailing girl, now crouched a great, snarling beast, Marquis; fur of white and claws of black and eyes of icy blue, fixed now upon that dumbstruck Prince of Forever.

"A *wolf*.

"We could not believe what we were seeing. Horror and awe in equal measure, no breath in our breast to whisper. Shock rippled among the bloodied Unbound, those men yet fighting now struck still at the sight of her. No more a sister, a daughter, a messiah, but a *beast,* towering, snarling, rippling with wrath.

"'Sweet Mothermaid,' Phoebe whispered. '*Dior…*'

"She moved; a flash of white fur and fangs, a blood-drenched *roar*. Her jaws closed about the Maiden's outstretched hand and *snapped* shut, severing steel and flesh. Kestrel screamed; the bubbling, hate-filled cry of one so old and hard she'd forgotten what it was to hurt. And despite whatever edict her King had given, she lashed out with her scythe.

"The weapon bit deep, holy blood spraying. Dior was sent flying, tumbling and snarling. But in a heartbeat, she twisted upright, maw and sundered flanks dripping blood. That mighty she-wolf shook herself like a waterlogged hound, spraying yet more blood and setting the wretched all about her aflame. And as that blood fell, glittering, rubied, we heard the familiar whip-*snap* of tearing air as each drop became a perfect needle wrought by the power of Dior's own will, glittering, shimmering, poised in the air around her head.

"'*What be this madness?* ' Kestrel hissed.

"The gatekeep was yet firing among the Dead, flame streaking across thundering skies. Our belly filled with long-dead butterflies as we saw a storm of tiny red wings descending through the smoke and fire, swirling in an ever-tightening spiral. The droplets became one; silk and alabaster and long blond curls. And stood now between that snarling wolf and that Prince of Forever, Maryn, Mother of Monsters, inclined her head.

"'*Prince Kestrel.*'

"The Ironheart glowered, ruined arm to her breast.

"'*Maryn the Faithless.*'

"The ancien smiled, hatred burning in her gaze. '*Long years hath passed since we fought at the Charbourg, Majesty. Justice* dearly *overdue.*'

"The wolf that had been Dior snarled, lunging around Maryn and toward the Maiden. But Kestrel flashed backward, braids whipping about blood-daubed cheeks. Her eyes were fixed on Maryn as my Priori flung hands out at her sides. Blood sprayed, spilling, slicing; a whirling storm of bloodblades hissing through the air around her, spinning faster, ever faster. Dior snarled again, her rubied needles glittering in the air.

"A stillness seemed to fall then—not just over the Iron Maiden, but the battlefield entire. It was as if every Dead thing in that Endless Legion, every high and foulblooded monster that battled under the flag of Voss paused for unneeded breath. Kestrel blinked, and again we saw those bloody eyes painted upon her own and we knew, we *knew* who now looked through them. We were yet on our backside in the bloody snow, putting the pieces together in our mind; still bewildered at this most stunning of turns.

"But so was the mind behind the Maiden.

"For years he'd labored toward this moment; cutting his way south with his unliving host—cunning, implacable. And while there was no feint he'd fall for, no strike he'd not see coming, he'd clearly not foreseen *this*—Dior taking another step toward his daughter, baring fangs that were just as much a bane to our kind as fire or silver, and blood that could burn any vampire to ashes arrayed in a red halo about her head.

"The winter-white air grew colder still, and we felt a presence then, bringing all on those bloody walls and cobbles to stillness. We could *feel* him—the weight of centuries untallied, of murders uncounted, an evil so vast it was almost unthinkable.

"The Forever King.

“In my mind, I could see him; sire of our sire, first of the line that birthed me, most fearsome of the Five. His skin, hair, every part of him bleached snow-pale save his eyes, black as the mouth of hell. A youth he was, slender and fine, cloaked in a cold unlight that burned his shape onto the backs of my eyes. The voices in me were stilled for the terror of him, the silence in my head overwhelming. Into that quiet, he spoke with his daughter’s tongue, and his words were the song that would unmake the world.

“‘*I have forever, child.*’

“Kestrel smiled, grim, cold, one thousand years wide.

“‘*I* am *forever.*’

“The wretched began moving, the spell broken at some unspoken command. But instead of continuing their push on that last gatekeep, the Dead began streaming backward, away through the ravaged streets of Rive Nord. We almost couldn’t fathom it, blinking hard in case our eyes had betrayed us. Yet as close as he’d come to crushing the capital, as baffling as it might appear, the Endless Legion was …

“God Almighty, they were *retreating*.

“As her foulbloods began flooding out of the bleeding city, the Iron Maiden yet watched Maryn. My Priori was motionless, but that storm of bloody blades still sliced the air about her, and that snarling wolf yet stood at her side.

“The Maiden inclined her head.

“‘*All Shall Kneel.*’

“Maryn smiled in answer, cold as an empty tomb.

“‘*Judgment Comes.*’

“A cry went up from the walls, Augustin’s defenders at last realizing what was happening. From the brink of defeat, reprieve had been snatched, a great roar now ringing over that shattered square. Wretched were leaking out of Rive Nord like a bloody tide, Kestrel now following, the streets red and empty in their wake. And through the bewildered Unbound yet standing pushed a gasping figure, soaked and shivering.

“Most were overcome with all they’d just seen, me among them—our eyes still fixed on our savior, messiah, monster. Dior herself was trembling, ears pressed to her skull and whining in the back of her throat. But to that great wolf’s side, the figure now *sprinted*; Joaquin Marenn, the brave houndboy of Aveléne, skidding to his knees in the bloody slush. In that wolf’s shadow, I saw a figure was yet curled; bleeding her last into the snow.

“Drenched, gasping, Joaquin turned Reyne over, blanching in horror at the terrible wound Kestrel had inflicted. He snapped his golden vial from about his neck, and as the wolf that was Dior looked on with glittering eyes, Joaquin pressed it to Reyne’s lips, those few drops from the Grail’s wrist spilling over her blood-red tongue.

“For a moment, all remained as it was. I saw the Unbound murmur among themselves, Phoebe and I exchanging a glance. But as before, as *always,* before our wondering eyes, we saw the Princess's awful wound finally healing, the bones knit closed, her unwholesome pallor now flush with vigor.

"Eyes wide, Reyne á Maergenn rose with Joaquin's help, trembling as she looked at that great white wolf in wonder.

"'God in heaven. Dior…'

"With a low whimper, the wolf licked the Princess's bloody hand. Overwhelmed, the Princess yet threw her arms around the great beast's neck, holding on for dear life. All around us, we could feel the storm of Unbound thoughts—wonder at their victory, horror at their losses, bewilderment at Dior's new form. They looked rattled. Bewildered. Afraid.

"My thoughts were racing, wondering how in God's name all this had come to pass. But here was explanation—the healing of her wounds, her strange vitality, the restlessness that had gripped for months aboard *Dawnseeker*. Dior's mind was ever closed to me, but the beast that was the Grail looked frightened, ears pulled back, pressed tight against her Princess's flank. Phoebe approached, hand out in supplication, but the beast only snarled.

"'It's *me,* Flower,' the fleshwitch pleaded. 'Ye *know* me…'

"The wolf roared then, halting Phoebe in her tracks.

"'How is this *possible*?'

"Reyne looked her beloved over, mismatched eyes awonder. Though Dior flinched, she still allowed the Princess to run gentle hands over her cheeks, down her neck. The fur was lustrous, thick, pale as the snows of yesteryears and soaked in blood.

"'What the *hell* is happening, Phoebe?'

"'She is Risen.'

"The Princess and 'dancer both glanced at us as we spoke. Mother Maryn looked just as perplexed as they, black gaze drifting from Dior to us. We knew we must have looked a horror—legs cleft off at the knees, eye crushed out, hair burned back to the scalp. We'd wake amorrow in the state we died in, but still …

"*'Liathe? Of what doth ye speak? '*

"'The miracle, Mother. The one we all beheld.'

"Phoebe snarled, eyes flashing. 'The bleeding fuck ye babblin' about, ye d—'

"'We wondered what brought Dior back to life after the Heartless slew her. We were content to think it a miracle for want of better explanation. But as you told us when we met, fleshwitch, only silver can kill a wealdling of the Moonsthrone. Silver, magik, and the cold teeth of age. Though Lilidh snapped her neck, it seems Dior was not slain at all.'

"Reyne frowned. 'I don't understand. I saw Dior touch silver in Maergenn. And her fingers never grew back after they were torn off. If she was a wealdling this whole time…'

"'But she *wasn't,*' we replied. 'It's as our heathen friend here told you, Princess. The gift of the Moonsthrone only calls to a duskdancer's child when their parents are slain. Dior's mother has been dead for years. Her father must have perished during the Battle of Maergenn. *After* her hand was wounded, but *before* her broken neck could kill her.'

"Phoebe swallowed hard. In her mind, I could see that great white wolf, brawling with the Heartless in the tomb under Maergenn.

"Dying in defense of Reyne and Dior.

"'It *cannae* be…'

"'But it *must.* What was it you called your husband, fleshwitch? A royal vagabond? A man who traveled the world he hoped to rule, in order to better understand it? It seems in addition to trekking from Asheve's shores to the capital itself, bedding streetwalkers in Lashaame was also part of your Connor's grand education. And leaving bastard daughters in his wake an all too common occurrence.'

"'Daughters…' Reyne looked to Phoebe, touching the braid of everknots about her throat. 'But if I've his eyes, and Dior his gifts, that would mean we're half…'

"Dior whined, licking the Princess's bloody hand.

"*'Sisters.'*"

XVII

HEAVENLY

“IT WAS A *long* wait ’til sunset next day, Marquis.

“Though we’d just delivered Augustin from destruction, her defenders were unwilling to venture from their gatekeep while darkness held sway. Those soldiers remained safe behind their battlements, leaving us to find shelter in the wreckage. And though the night was bitter chill, we were in no position to approach those gates yet.

“The problem, of course, was Dior.

“’Dancers can only shift with the dusk, and dusk had long since melted into night. That great white she-wolf still stood among us, the girl we knew glinting only faintly behind the feral blue of her eyes. And truth was, none of us knew quite what to do with her.

“We could not touch her thoughts to calm her down, and Dior was clearly distraught, snapping, snarling even at Phoebe—it seemed only Reyne could approach without upsetting her. Princess á Maergenn did her best, but Dior remained unsettled, and in truth, her presence was unsettling in kind to her men—most of whom still had no clue how to *feel* about all of this. In the end, it was decided Dior and Reyne should wait out the night alone in a ruined chapel on the west side of Place San Antoine.

“None knew what the Princess whispered to the Grail in those dark hours—even if they hadn’t slept on holy ground, not even *I* had heart enough to intrude.

“Dawn next day brought chill sunlight and heated conversation. Dior’s

Unbound spoke in hushed tones, gathered around small hearths in demolished homes, debating what must come next. I could have given answer, of course—what came *next* was the sainted blade, the throne of Augustin, the end of daysdeath. In my head, strange as it was, this change had changed *nothing*. But my wounds would not heal until sunset, and I was loath to drag myself through bloody slush on bloody stumps to share opinions.

"Though a few dozen defenders had emerged from the gatekeep to begin the grisly task of burning bodies, none had yet approached our square—Augustin's soldiers were still clearly unsure what to make of us. And so, an uneasy day passed, most of our company catching up on desperately needed sleep, wrangling with troubled thoughts and scrounging what fare they could among the desolation in the Forever King's wake.

"It was near sunset when we heard movement. Looking toward the gatekeep, we saw a cadre of hundreds marching out under the banner of House Augustin—a golden field set with a unicorn and five crossed swords, representing the five countries of their empire. My legs were almost hale now, and I limped about in search of my boots, finding them in a slurry of bloodstained frost and tipping the remains of our former feet from within. Phoebe dashed toward Dior's chapel, Maryn standing calm in the falling snow.

"Ever watching.

"'Joaquin!' the fleshwitch cried. 'Bring them, lad!'

"The houndboy scrambled to his feet, and as the Emperor's men marched toward us, he ran to Phoebe with a bundle of simple clothes and soldiers' boots in his arms. The surviving Unbound—less than a hundred in number—were on their feet now. A few cast wary glances toward the oncoming troops, but most stood with hearts hushed, faces ashen, staring at the broken door of that chapel. Unsure who or *what* might emerge.

"Would she be different now? Would she still be *their* Dior?

"Daughter? Sister? Messiah?

"We saw movement, heart in throat as they emerged into the night—Phoebe, Reyne, and shuffling behind, ashen and filthy and clad in cloth barely fit for a beggar, the one true hope of the world. Her eyes were ringed by awful shadows, cheeks hollowed and shoulders slumped. Dior looked about the trembling firelight, the men who'd put *so* much faith in her. And from only God knows where, she summoned a smile.

"'Anyone g-got a cigarelle?'

"Her chuckle broke the spell of stillness, the tension in the air, and in her eyes, they saw the girl they all knew. Joaquin raised his hand with finger and thumb outstretched.

"'God be praised!'

"'San Dior!' came the cry from the men, their hands held likesame.

"'*SAN DIOR!* '

"She smiled wider then, wearied but warm, her Unbound rushing to her side. We signed the wheel, echoing Mother Maryn as she whispered thanks to Almighty God. Dior was surrounded now, a babble of questions, a flurry of well-wishes, her eyes shining as she kissed dirty cheeks and bloodied brows and thanked heaven these few yet lived. We'd wondered if the Unbound had wavered, but their love seemed utterly undimmed, and her legend only grown. *Heaven's Huntress,* they declared her. *The White Wolf of God*. And as those troops marched closer under the Emperor's colors, the Unbound formed up before her, hands on blades and eyes ablaze, more willing than ever to die for their savior.

"Reyne stood beside the Grail, pale and weary. Reaching out gently to the Princess's mind, we felt twinned emotions, a duet bright and bittersweet. Joy; that her beloved was saved, the world's salvation close to hand. But heartbreak also; to know they could both be fruit of the same vine. This Princess of Low and High and the Godling true—born of the Moonsthrone after all, just as prophecy had promised. And as Reyne looked upon the girl that was her love, we heard it again; that word she'd spoke yestereve, echoing now in the halls of her broken heart.

"*Sisters*.

"We moved behind the line, Maryn at our side. Dior was watching the oncoming soldiers, cheeks hollowed and jaw clenched. But glancing at us sidelong, she gifted us a wink, the shadows under her eyes making that blue shine all the brighter.

"'Hell of a day,' she whispered.

"'Not hell, chérie,' we replied.

"Maryn nodded, casting her gaze to the skies.

"'*Heavenly*.'"

XVIII

BY SAINTED BLADE

"'WHO SPEAKS FOR this company?'

"The capitaine was tall, broad, less than twenty. His accent was nobleborn, but though he was young, decidedly handsome, his face bore scars of battle, and his eyes, the shadow of war. He wore a suit of platemail embossed with a unicorn and five swords, a tattered golden cloak. Chestnut hair was cropped in soldier's fashion, bright blue eyes glittering in the torchlight. His kit was soiled with blood, and the fine longblade in his hand was well loved and well used.

"The cadre about him wore golden tabards of House Augustin, five hundred strong. Each was armed to the teeth—burning brands, longblades and spears run with silver, wheellock rifles. Several wore the embroidered vestments of priests of the Faith under their hauberks, silver wheels burning with holy light about their necks.

"We slunk back at their approach, Maryn beside us. And through our line, a figure stepped forward, chin high and mismatched eyes ablaze.

"'I will speak.'

"The handsome capitaine looked the Princess over, lips pursed.

"'And you are, mademoiselle?'

"'Reyne á Maergenn. Fifthborn daughter of Niamh Nineswords, Duchess of Ossway, and firstborn daughter of Connor á Lachlainn, Laerd of the Moonsthrone Mountains. I am a Princess of Lands Low and High, come with this holy company from the wreckage of Ossway and the grave of my royal mother and father.’

“The Princess spoke with regal bearing, chin held high. We were reminded of that statue in the foyer of her ruined dún then; the legend from which this pup was birthed.

“‘*Holy?* ’

“The young capitaine’s jaw clenched, fists likesame. And though we lingered at the company’s rear like wraiths, that sapphire gaze fell unerringly upon us.

“‘Unless my eyes be liars, or I a fool, you bring the *Dead* to our door.’

“‘Oui.’ Reyne licked at dry lips, nodding. ‘But these two have journeyed long with our company, and I swear God they are no friends to the Forever K—’

“The Princess fell quiet, silenced by the rise of the young man’s hand.

“‘Who might you be, Highlander?’

“‘Phoebe á Dúnnsair, Laerdbride of the Clan Lachlainn. And there’s nae *might* about it.’ The fleshwitch nodded to the girl beside her. ‘This is Dior Lachance.’

“The Grail inclined her head. ‘Bonsoir, Capitaine.’

“The man raised one brow, glancing to the cadres behind him. At his back, we saw the young crook-eyed soldierboy whose life Dior had saved.

“‘This is the one, Louis?’

“‘Oui, Majesty.’ The boy bowed. ‘I seen it meself. Her blood brung the dead back to life, it did. Healed my own hurts whole. And it burned the rottens to ashes when it t—’

“That hand rose again. Sapphire eyes roamed Dior, brow to bloodied boots.

“‘The price of witchery in this empire is death, petite fille.’

“‘I’m no witch, monsieur.’

“‘My name is Philippe. Eldest son of Alexandre III and Prince of all Elidaen.’

“‘Lovely to meet you, Majesty. But I’m still no fucking witch.’

“The young man scowled, Phoebe stepping in before trouble bloomed.

“‘Dior Lachance is a maid of the Mothers. Savior of Dún Maergenn. Heavensent Godling of the Moonsthrone, and Holy Grail of San Michon.’

“The Prince seemed unmoved. Cold eyes drifted over the ravaged city, the mangled corpses and burning ruins, before returning to Reyne.

“‘Please, Your Majesty,’ she said. ‘I swear before God and Mothermaid we are here with holy intent. And if my oath is no assurance, my sister will speak to my character.’

“‘Sister?’

“‘Dame Yvaine, wife of Duke Maarten.’

“‘Duke Maarten is Warden of the South now, mademoiselle. He and his bride keep vigil from the château at Daggercoast. Lady Yvaine cannot vouch for you.'

"'Then let the battle yesterday speak to our intent! I swear God we are true enemies to the Forever King, Majesty, and we would treat with His Grace, your noble father, Alexandre III, on a matter of direst import!'

"'My father is dead, Mlle á Maergenn.'

"Reyne's fervor died swift, and she bowed her head.

"'I'm … so sorry, Majesty. Forgive me, please. I also lost my mother in the fires of war. But I am certain your noble father died valiantly, defending the people he loved.'

"'He died slowly. Eaten from the inside out.'

"The Prince turned his gaze to the sky, breathing deep. But looking to those dark clouds, his sorrow faded, and the glint of iron returned to his eye.

"'We were but a heartbeat from calamity, Mlle á Maergenn. All Augustin stood imperiled, and the empire besides. You keep strangest company. But whatever turned the Carrion Lord and his army back from our brink, only a fool could not conjure it has something to do with you.'

"'Not I, Majesty.' Reyne nodded to Dior. '*Her.*'

"'Heaven's Huntress,' Joaquin said.

"'La demoiselle du Graal,' a Callum nodded.

"The young Prince looked again to Dior, lips pursed. The Grail stared back, wearied beyond reckoning, yet standing tall. The snows had finally stopped falling, and though the skies were yet black above, the light from those glowing wheels and burning brands seemed to dance on the pale blue arcs of Dior's eyes.

"The Prince nodded. 'My Empress shall have wish to speak with you.'

"'Merci, P—'

"'Follow.'

"The Prince was already marching away, boots crunching in frost and gore, cloak billowing behind him. His soldiers encircled our company, blades ready, torches ablaze, eyes mostly fixed on Maryn or myself. My Priori met every gaze, smiling soft; a cherub drenched in blood. Every one of us was exhausted, hungry, battered, and bruised, but as Dior followed the young Prince, all her company yet walked behind her. And surely no prouder parade has ever marched under heaven's skies.

"Dior walked at our fore, Reyne stalking beside her; close, but not near enough to touch. Though the Grail showed little sign of her ordeal save weariness, we wondered how she must be feeling. To be revealed as a child of the Redeemer's line, *and* a daughter of the Moonsthrone? Half sister to her beloved? How might this play out in the end?

"We studied the fortifications before us, lit by torchlight; the cadres of soldiers along the battlements, dark stone and massive ironwood doors embossed with the Emperor's seal. Though only a gatekeep, the structure was more impressive than most châteaux we'd seen. And still, the Voss had come *so* close to breaching it …

"Corpses were piled against the walls—great hills of dead flesh and gleaming fangs, burning in the rising night. Dior looked at them, lips pinched, whispering a soft prayer. Though her mind was ever closed to us, we could guess what she was thinking.

"*How many could I have saved if we'd come but one day earlier?*

"Though the air was still chill, it seemed winter had departed with the legion, and the first breath of summer kissed our skin. The gates opened wide, Prince Philippe marching into the tunnel beyond, and our company followed, flanked by his troops. Though their discipline was perfect, as we passed beyond onto the bridge into Rive Cœur, we could hear soldiers on the walls gossiping, runners sprinting ahead, bearing word of she who'd healed the sick, saved the dying, rescued the city from the Forever King himself.

"*'The White Wolf of God,'* they whispered.

"*'Heaven's Huntress.'*

"*'La demoiselle du Graal.'*

"Across the bridge we marched—an ancient archway of solid granite looming fifty feet over the frozen river. Our eyes drifted over the half-frozen Béni below, the ravaged ports of Rive Nord and Sud, the horrors of the Forever King's assault now full unveiled. In the icy waters, we saw galleys smashed upon each other and sunk to their masts. Our Dead heart fell as we spied *Dawnseeker* among them; the swordmaid on her bowsprit submerged all the way to her blade. We signed the wheel and whispered farewell, both for she who'd borne us over the seas to be here, and for her master—good Capitaine á Connell, who had fallen with so many others defending the Grail from the Iron Maiden's blade.

"Horns rang out, and our gaze shifted to the gate at bridge's end. This second keephouse was grander than the first, built atop a sheer cliff rising from the river below. Standards rippled in chill winds; golden cloth stained by soot and smoke. A thousand eyes followed as we marched through the walls, and finally into the streets of Rive Cœur.

"The heart of Augustin power on earth.

"Though night had fallen, those streets were *thronged,* not just with soldiers, but commonfolk too. Many were refugees from Rive Nord and Sud, come to look upon their deliverers. Rumor was rushing ahead swifter than any arrow, folk peering from high-flung windows, all eyes on the girl, the miracle, the *savior* at the heart of us.

"She raised her wounded hand. And we were amazed to see many among the crowd lift their hands in return, forefingers and thumbs outstretched.

"*'Bless you, child! '* one cried.

"*'God be praised for your coming! '*

"Rive Cœur was riven with man-made canals, and we crossed four bridges on the way through, past grand estates and statues of emperors long dead.

The roads began to open up, and Prince Philippe called for folk to make way—the boulevard was flooded now, onlookers scrabbling to get a glimpse of Dior. The Grail looked overwhelmed, weariness beginning to get the best of her. But Phoebe and Reyne walked at her side, and by their strength was she kept upright. After an age, we saw them rising above the roofs ahead, our heart with them; the towers of the Château Impérial, and the gleaming spires of …

"'*Cathédrale de Lumière,*' Maryn whispered.

"'You know it, Mother?'

"Our Priori nodded, and as she looked to heaven, we saw bloody tears in her eyes. "*Neath those holy foundations doth our brother Oleander abide in eventide with the sainted blade. We are* close, *sweet Liathe, so close, oh, all glory be unto thee my Lord, my God.*'

"'*Véris,*' we whispered, our heart ablaze.

"Yet it was not to those goldglass spires the Prince marched us, but the keep at the city's heart. We'd considered the walls of Dún Maergenn impressive, Marquis, but I tell you now, and true, we had *never* seen a château as magnificent as this. It was as if a fortress had a dream of all it might one day become, and awoke to find that dream true. *Miles* of battlements, great towers and sweeping arches, carved not by masons, but *poets,* and crowned by a spire that reached toward the daystar like a son to his holy father. Only if the sovereign of heaven himself were to build a bastion might that place know a rival.

"'Château Impérial,' we breathed.

"Great gates we passed, great courtyards we crossed, ever in that stern Prince's wake. As we walked majestic halls, marble and gold and carpets red as blood, Dior's eyes grew wide with wonder, the scale of it all beggaring belief.

"Magnificent doors loomed at the end of a long hallway, embossed with designs immortalizing the conquests of Maximille Augustin I, the Seventh Martyr. Prince Philippe came to halt, the soldiers surrounding us tense as bowstrings. We stood now at the heart of imperial power on earth, never closer to the fulfillment of the prophecy, Dior's destiny, the end of daysdeath. To stumble here was to lose our lives. Souls. World.

"'A princess is worthy to set foot beyond these doors, Reyne á Maergenn,' Philippe declared. 'A trothwife to a Clanlaerd also, Phoebe á Dúnnsair. And my Empress shall have desire to see this … Maid of the Grail. But the corpses will remain here, as will your soldiers. And should your hearts prove black, their lives shall be the price of your folly.'

"We bristled at that. But we felt Maryn's mind in ours then, light as feathers.

"*Peace, sweet Liathe. In safe keeping do we leave our savior.*

"None of the company looked pleased at this news, but hearing no dissent, Philippe stepped up to those mighty doors, and at some hidden signal, they opened without a sound. Looking at the room beyond, we were thankful we'd come at night—God only knew how painful the glare must have been in years before the death of days.

"'My *God…'* Joaquin breathed.

"I nodded, my voice awonder. 'The Golden Halls of Augustin.'

"The room was bewildering and vast, lined with a great river of blood-red carpet. Pillars as tall as ancient oaks stretched to the ceiling overhead. Towering windows of cut crystal looked out on the great city beyond, and to the bewilderment of our company, we saw the walls themselves were wrought of solid, gleaming gold.

"With a last glance, Reyne and Dior followed Prince Philippe inside, Phoebe behind, golden light glinting on her hair, her breastplate, her hunter's eyes. A dozen soldiers followed the Prince, but the rest remained outside. I'd no need to read their minds to know they were one crossed word away from murder, and I'd risk no wrath by using my bloodgifts here. But that wasn't to say I was blind as those doors swung shut."

"Your moth," Jean-François said, turning to a fresh page in his tome.

"Just so." Celene nodded. "Dior's coat and mail were sundered when she'd become the wolf, but my mote had not been left behind. It was sat in the warm dimple beneath Reyne's right ear now, hid beneath those summer-flame braids. The Princess's pulse thumped swift beneath our feet, our thoughts skimming her own.

"Though Reyne tried to keep her wits, the wealth on display in that hall made her mother's dún look a panhandler's hovel. The golden walls were hung with portraits of proud men; emperors all, clad in finery or suits of plate, each wearing the same crown. The pillars were marble, inlaid with black pearl, reaching up to a ceiling adorned with stunning frescoes. But though awed by the opulence, the Princess could not help but notice each curtain was wrought of enough velvet to serve as a hundred winter cloaks, and the wool in the carpets at her feet could have clothed a thousand war orphans in the streets outside.

"The room was filled with people—courtiers of the Golden Halls. Though the city had stood on the edge of disaster but a sunset before, most had found time to primp their hair and deck themselves in velvet and silk. A passel of holy men stood among them; cardinals with robes of rich crimson, hands dripping silver and gold. Even the *guards* were clad in tabards edged with true silver stitching, pommels glittering with rubies. Reyne tugged at the frayed edge of her doublet, dragged fingers through her grimy hair, and we felt her abashment. But Dior stood tall in her rags, and Phoebe simply glowered, those golden eyes meeting every haughty stare so fierce and fey that most looked away.

"A dais rose at the hall's end, and two thrones there waited. Upon the lower was a woman, brow graced with silvered diamonds, eyes glittering like sapphires. But the higher throne was empty, save for the crown upon its cushion. The seat was strange in its crafting, as if five different hands had fashioned five different thrones, then crushed them together—and of course, that was near the truth. The high seats of each country in the continent claimed by Maximille, brought back to his capital and wrought into one.

"The Fivefold Throne of Elidaen.

"'My Empress Isabella,' Prince Philippe called. 'First of Her Name, beloved widow of Alexandre III, Protector of God's Holy Church and ruler of all Elidaen, I present Princess Reyne á Maergenn, daughter of Niamh Nineswords, Phoebe á Dúnnsair, Laerdbride of the Moonsthrone Mountains, and…'

"Here the Prince paused, glancing toward the Grail.

"'Dior Lachance.'

"The Empress was mute, studying the trio. She was a beauty, naturally; long-limbed and fine, possessed of the self-assured grace that only a woman of middle-thirty can fully wield. Though she wore no crown, her auburn hair was styled in the seeming of one, the diamonds at her brow glittering in the light of the chandeliers overhead. In her face, we could immediately see the resemblance to her handsome son, and though her golden velvet gown was the kind of gorgeous Dior would have gladly died to own, the Empress also wore a breastplate of silver, embossed with sigils of her noble house and a line of scripture from the Book of Vows.

"*Turn ye now, oh faithless kings of men, and look upon thy queen.*

"'La demoiselle du Graal.'

"Sapphire eyes roamed Dior, from her filthy ashen hair all the way down to her dead soldier's boots. And though we expected this Empress of men perhaps to scoff, to scorn, instead her smile was warm as mulled wine on a wintersdeep day.

"'Aren't you a picture.'

"Dior and Reyne exchanged a glance, both girls mute.

"'Has our son thought to offer refreshment?' Isabella asked. 'Your road to Augustin looks to have been a long one. We'd not leave you wanting at its end.'

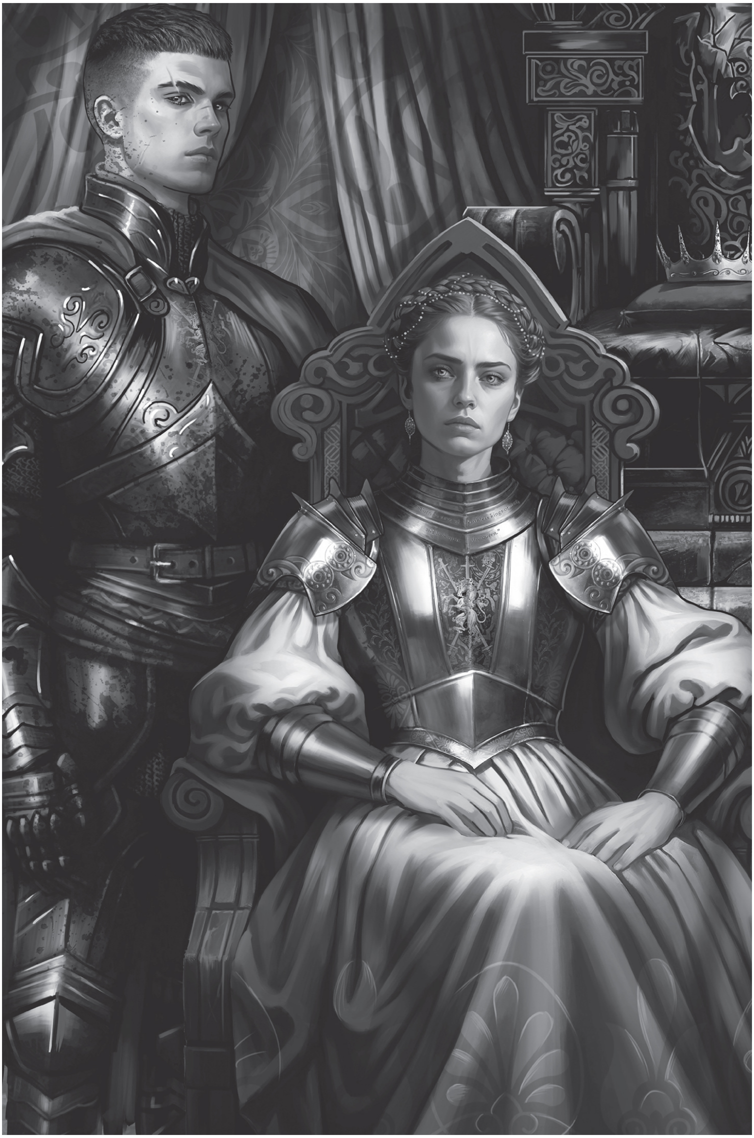
"'N-no.' Dior managed something between a bow and curtsey. 'Merci.'

"Princess Reyne cleared her throat. 'Your Grace.'

"'I m-mean no, Your Grace. Merci, Your Grace.'

"The Prince scowled, but the Empress only smiled wider as a servant stepped forward with a golden tray, laden with brimming cups.

"'Wherefrom are you come, child?'



“‘Dún Maergenn, Your Grace.’ Dior stood taller, beginning to find her balance now. ‘The city is destroyed by the Dyvok. We few are all that remain. But the Untamed are defeated. The Blackheart and Heartless both slain.’

“A murmur rippled among the court at that, holy men whispering prayers and making the sign of the wheel. Empress Isabella spoke again, her voice soft.

“‘Our heart was bled white to hear of Duchess á Maergenn’s passing. The

Nineswords' loss was felt as keen as our own royal husband's by all here in these Golden Halls. We offer condolence to her noble daughter in this time of deepest sorrow.'

"Reyne curtseyed, speaking soft thanks. And though the Princess's cheeks were warmed by the Empress's kind words, Isabella's eyes never left Dior's.

"'Yet we did not ask wherefrom you traveled, child. But wherefrom you are come.'

"Prince Philippe turned to those holy men, gathered to the right of the throne.

"'Lashaame, was it not, High Inquisitrix?'

"'Oh *shit…'* Dior hissed.

"From among the bishops and cardinals, a woman stepped forward, a copy of the Testaments under her arm. She wore black leathers, a blood-red tabard embroidered with the flower and flail of Naél, Angel of Bliss, a gauntlet of black steel on her right hand. She was middle-fifty, stiletto-thin, grey hair cut in a sharp fringe. A tricorn was her crown, dark lace veiling darker eyes, sharp enough to flay the skin off the Grail's back.

"'Oui, Majesty,' she replied, crisp and venomous. 'There charged for crimes of heresy, bloodwitchery, and the *murder* of Bishop Henri Merciér.'

"The courtiers gasped, sudden babble ringing on the frescoes overhead. The Grail clenched her fists, shouting over the tumult.

"'I can explain!'

"Isabella's smile dimmed in the sudden still. 'S'il vous plaît, chérie.'

"'My blood can cure the sick. Mend the dying. Your own soldiers can testify to that. The Inquisition called it witchery. But Sœur Chloe Sauvage, sister of the Silver Order, and Père Rafa Sa-Araki, brother of the Order of San Guillaume, found me and told me the truth.'

"Isabella's brow rose, ever so slight. 'Truth?'

"Dior faltered, chewing her lip and looking to Reyne. Though she believed in herself, that faith seemed to be paling under that relentless sapphire gaze. She was the descendant of the Redeemer, oui. The Godling born. But truth was, she was still a seventeen-year-old girl, stood before the most powerful woman in the empire and her entire court besides.

"Phoebe squeezed her hand. 'Nae fear, Flower.'

"'I am the Holy Grail of San Michon.' Murmurs filled the hall again, and Dior raised her voice over the clamor. 'The cup that holds the Blood of the Redeemer himself! He was the son of God, but a mortal man also, and his love for his disciple Michon bore fruit! A daughter named Esan!' The bishops and cardinals erupted, smashing crook staves upon the floor and bellowing of heresy, and Dior shouted over their outrage. 'I am her descendant! The Blood of the Redeemer flows in me! And through that blood, may the Legions of the Dead be defeated, and the sun returned to the sky once more!'

"The court was in bedlam now, courtiers babbling, cardinals roaring, the

Prince's hand upon his sword. And in the midst of that hue and cry, Empress Isabella, First of Her Name, raised one slender hand. She spoke no word, and her eyes never left the Grail's. But in only a handful of heartbeats, that clamor died completely.

"Isabella smiled again.

"'And what of the bishop you murdered in Lashaame, chérie?'

"'That was…' Dior scowled, her cheeks now pinked with rage. 'He deserved it. That *bastard* hurt my friend.'

"'Did our Inquisitorial troops deserve it also?' Prince Philippe demanded. 'You slaughtered a score of them during your escape from Redwatch Priory.'

"'That was different. They butchered an entire monastery of monks at San Guillaume. They were torturing me and—'

"'And the silversaints you murdered at San Michon? They deserved it also?'

"'Aright, tha's fuckin' *it*.'

"Phoebe á Dúnnsair stepped forward, sharp teeth bared. We had felt the rage in her, that daughter of the Moonsthrone, soft at first, but rising now to boil.

"'This girl has walked through hell to be here,' she snarled. 'She has slain Princes of Forever, undone ancien of the Untamed, liberated a nation that ye and yers lifted nae a *finger* to help. And in case ye missed the messenger? She just saved yer capital from the legions of the Forever King! All she has done, she has done fer the good of this world, and I shall march meself to the burnin' hells, get down on my knees, and suck the *cock* of the Fallen himself afore I stand here meek and see her questioned like a common jackroller.'

"The Prince glowered, bristling with outrage. 'I should cut out your heathen t—'

"'Hush, Philippe.'

"The Prince clenched his jaw, glancing to his mother. But still, he obeyed.

"'You have a way with words, Phoebe á Dúnnsair,' Isabella said. 'But you stand before the Empress of the Augustin Dynasty. And she is owed your respect.'

"'Beg pardon, Yer Grace. But respect be a boon oft' given afore received.'

"Prince Philippe looked to his mother, a breath away from clapping the fleshwitch in irons. But with a small—and somewhat irritated—gesture, the Empress bid the Prince stand down. She gazed once more at Dior, tension thick enough to slice with a knife.

"'Where is your chief conspirator, Mlle Lachance?'

"'My…'

"'We are told he was with you when you painted San Cleyland Priory and San Michon Monastery red with the blood of the faithful. The Inquisition has placed a death warrant upon his head as well as yours.'

"'… You know Gabe?' Dior asked.

"'Gabriel de León is nae *conspirator,*' Phoebe growled. 'And I'll nae suffer slights to his good name any more than to Dior's, Yer Grace. He saved my life, and this sweet girl's, a dozen times over. Though nae his blood, he counts her dear as his own kin, and were he stood here now, he'd speak as high of her as I.'

"'He always had a silver tongue,' Isabella said. 'Sadly, he never knew where to put it.'

"Titters rippled among the court, but the Empress's tone grew cold.

"'We know the Black Lion of Lorson, chérie. By our own blade was he knighted Sword of the Realm, and by our own hand was he gifted greatness. And he chose to repay that honor by breaking his holy oath, and bedding a holy sister, and seeing himself excommunicated from his holy order. Well did we know his bride also, in days she lived here at court. And though she doubtless had her charms, we deem it a shame Elidaen's Sword chose to sup from so poisoned a chalice.' Sapphire eyes fell on Phoebe. 'Were she here, would Astrid Rennier sing la demoiselle du Graal's praises also, Mme á Dúnnsair?'

"'She'd sing nuthin', Yer Grace. Astrid Rennier is dead.'

"The Empress blinked. 'Dead.'

"'Slain by Fabién Voss along with her bairn. Gabriel's sweet daughter. Patience.'

"Silence rang upon those golden walls, those glittering jewels. Philippe looked to his mother, and though no trace marred her features, we saw pain behind Isabella's eyes. For ten long beats of a mortal heart she sat, still as stone, and no whisper could be heard in that Golden Hall. But she blinked then, her stillness broken, gaze returning to Dior.

"'We will admit your coming is portentous. Your arrival and the departure of the Dead legions cannot be coincidence. On matters of heresy and faithful blood spilled, we shall speak anon, have *no* doubt. But at the last, perhaps we should begin with the first.'

"The Empress leaned forward, pinning the Grail in her stare.

"'Why are you here, Mlle Lachance?'

"'To end the death of days, Your Grace. To bring back the sun.'

"'And you think you will find it hid beneath our skirts?'

"Dior smiled then, and Isabella's lip curled also, ever so slight.

"'No,' the Grail replied. 'But…'

"Here she looked again at Reyne, at Phoebe, the enormity of what she must ask beginning to dawn. No matter the nature of her coming, her deliverance of this city, it seemed there was no shortage of malice for her in these Golden Halls. Truth is, she *was* a murderer. A thief. A heretic in the eyes of the One Faith. And for her to state the full extent of the prophecy here and now would have made her look a lunatic.

"To sit the Fivefold Throne?

"To be crowned sovereign of the empire entire?

"*Madness*.

"And so, she did as the Empress had done. Begin with the last thing first.

"'I need a sword, Your Grace.'

"The Prince scoffed. 'Your men carry *dozens* of—'

"'*Hush,* Philippe.'

"The Prince fell silent once more, scowling.

"Isabella's perfect brow rose again, ever so slight.

"'Not just any sword.' Dior glanced at the glowering Prince. 'Somewhere in this city is an ancien vampire named Oleander the Wise. He's a member of a secret bloodline called the Esana, the same as those two vampires who followed me here to Augustin. I know it sounds moonstouched, but they're our allies, Your Grace. They want to end daysdeath and bring back the sunlight, same as we.'

"The Grail ignored the murmurs rising about her, plunging onward.

"'Oleander has the keeping of the sword I need! He's been sleeping for centuries, but the ancien traveling with me knows where he lies—'

"'In a stone coffin,' Isabella interrupted. 'Deep beneath Cathédrale de Lumière.'

"Reyne blinked. 'How could you know that, Your Grace?'

"'We found him. We *destroyed* him.'

"Dior's face was bloodless, pale eyes on the Empress. '*When?* '

"'More than a decade past. Emperors of old were oft' buried in silvered tombs. We were reclaiming the metal to make arms when the vault was discovered. The vampire within was beheaded, its ashes scattered on holy ground. Nothing remains.'

"Our Dead heart twisted in the hallway outside. But if panic there gripped us, it was soon replaced by terror and despair as the Holy Grail looked to Isabella.

"'What about the sword?'

"'We gave it away.'

"'*Gave* it…'

"The Grail's eyes roamed those golden walls, those glittering globes, realization breaking through the rime of bewilderment.

"'*By your own hand was he gifted greatness.*'

"Isabella nodded. 'Just so.'

"'Ashdrinker,' Phoebe breathed.

"Dior sank to her knees. And it seemed then all the weight, all the miles and loss and heartbreak, crashed down upon her at last. We saw her shoulders slump, her chest deflate, ashen locks tumbling over tearstained cheeks as she bowed her head and whispered.

"'*Gabriel.*'"

XIX

A TASTE OF HOME

“WELL.” JEAN-FRANÇOIS ARCHED one brow, smirking. “Shit again, I suppose?”

Celene hung her head, dragging a claw over the oily stone. “Indeed.”

“I confess, Mlle Castia, I’m unsure whether or not I should have seen that coming.”

“It was the worst possible thing that could have happened to us at the time, Marquis. Of *course* you should have seen it coming.”

The historian chuckled. “For folk who claimed to have the Almighty on their side, you *do* seem to have been toyed with rather relentlessly by heaven’s sovereign.”

“The Lord moves in mysterious ways.”

“Surely you can do better than th—”

Jean-François fell silent, a heavy thumping echoing on the walls. He glanced at his majordomo, Meline stepping toward the stone doors behind him and pushing them wide. The Marquis recognized the newcomer’s scent without needing to turn.

“Well, well. My brave young beau, back from the dead.”

Dario bowed, eyes downturned. “Master.”

“Are you quite sure you should be up and about?” The historian regarded his young thrall fondly, noting the shadows beneath his eyes had faded, his pallor flushed once more. “Not that I’m displeased to see you so soon, but our Gabriel did drink you *awfully* dry.”

"Forgive me, Master. But I am sent by Her Grace's command. Dame Kestrel draws ever closer to Sul Adair, and the Empress has demanded a report on your progress."

"As is her right. But why have *you* dragged from your sickbed? Where is…" Jean-François frowned, pinching his nose. "Oh God, Meline, what *is* her name?"

"Jasminne, Master."

"*Jasminne.*" The Marquis snapped his fingers. "That little strumpet could have delivered this news as easily as you?"

"Jasminne is at the feast, Master. Entertaining the Draigann and Her Grace."

"… Oh."

The historian pouted, twirling his quill through clever fingers.

"Pity. That girl had rare talent."

Sighing, Jean-François shut his tome. The Last Liathe watched from across the waters, torchlight gleaming in the solid blacks of her eyes. The historian cleaned his quill, slipped it back inside its case, and with a sigh, rose from his armchair.

"You are leaving us?" Celene asked.

"I fear so," the Marquis replied. "Though the pleasure of your company is *boundless,* mademoiselle, matters are coming to a head swifter than I'd hoped. And I've left your dear brother alone quite long enough. He'll have demolished that Monét by now."

Chocolat eyes roamed Dario and Meline, a smile curling his lips.

"I imagine he's rather thirsty again."

"She will never let you keep him, you know." Celene tilted her head, eyes on the Marquis. "No matter what promises she made, the Empress of Wolves and Men will not suffer my brother to live."

Fangs glinted in the historian's grin. "Why think you I'm in such a hurry, Mlle Castia?"

Jean-François turned, stopped by the Liathe's voice.

"And me?"

The vampire blinked, blond brow rising. "What *about* you?"

"I have done as you bid. Told all I can, as courteous as I may." The Last Liathe swallowed, licking at full, pale lips. "We are *also* thirsty, Jean-François."

The fangs were truly on display now, glittering by firelight as the Marquis laughed.

"Starve, then."

The smile vanished, and with another snap of his fingers, the Marquis stalked from the cell. His thralls followed, shutting the door and sealing the Last Liathe inside with thick silver chain. Young Dario asked for the honors, and the Marquis smiled, handing over the key and watching as the boy shut the lock, wincing as the silver kissed his hands.

The halls of Sul Adair were bustling as the retinue emerged from below. News of Dame Kestrel's impending arrival had the servants in a flurry, the air stained with the delicious scent of warm bodies and fresh sweat. But beneath, the Marquis could smell the red perfume of the bloodfeast in the dining hall. Low moans echoed down the corridor, cries of passion and pain in the rafters. Again, Jean-François contemplated slipping inside for a cheeky bite, but it seemed his mother was growing impatient. So instead, the Marquis set to climbing up the wending tower stair, Meline and Dario and his soldiers behind.

Looking over his shoulder, he caught Dario's eye, smiling as the young lad flushed. He was glad his young beau was on his feet again—he'd roused the silversaint's passions yestereve after all, and Jean-François wondered if Gabriel might not be tempted again.

If he might let him watch.

Or even …

Delphine unlocked the tower door, and the Marquis stepped inside with a smile. As he suspected, Gabriel was slumped in his chair, long black hair draped about scarred cheeks, a bone-dry wine bottle before him. The room was lit by the chymical globe on the table, long shadows cast upon the floor, a pale white moth beating frail wings against the glass.

The Last Silversaint raised one dark brow, his voice a dusty growl.

"You took your t—"

He faltered then, storm-grey eyes gone wide as they fell upon the boy. Dario was looking at the silversaint with a cocktail of fear and want in his dark gaze, but as Gabriel rose to his feet, all Jean-François saw in him was rage.

"What the *fuck* is he doing in here?"

"I thought you might like some refr—"

"Get him out."

"Gabriel—"

"GET HIM OUT OF HERE!"

The Black Lion snatched up the empty bottle and flung it, Dario flinching as it burst on the wall just shy of his head. Delphine bellowed, stepping between the Marquis and the 'saint with longblade drawn, thralled soldiers all about him.

"*ENOUGH!*"

Jean-François's bark brought stillness to the room. He turned to the thrallboy, bleeding now from a cut on his cheek. And glancing to the silversaint, he saw those storm-grey eyes locked on that trickle of brilliant red, rage swallowed by an awful, soul-sick shame.

"Get him out of here, Jean-François."

Gabriel met his eyes, swallowing hard.

"*Please.*"

"Await me downstairs, Dario, there's a love."

The boy bowed swift, departing as he was bid. The Last Silversaint withered into his armchair, shaking silvered hands dragged back through his hair. With a nod of assurance to Delphine, the Marquis sent the soldiers out into the hallway. Only Jean-François and Meline remained, the former sinking into the chair opposite, the latter taking up her place at her master's side, hands behind her back.

"Thirsty?" the vampire asked.

Gabriel met his eyes; grey rimmed red, cracking all the way to the edges.

"You know I am."

"Meline could alleviate your suffering, mon ami."

The Last Silversaint looked up at the thrall, jaw clenched so tight his teeth creaked. His gaze roamed her body, beginning between her thighs, up her wasp-waisted bodice, over the pale bosom swelling above her corset, and settling at last on her throat. Meline's pulse was thunder, the choker cinched about her neck bobbing as she swallowed.

Jean-François smiled. "Meline, be a dear?"

Meline stepped forward, heart hammering in her breast, shadow falling over the wretch crouched in that chair. And slow, ever so slow, she sank to her knees before him.

"Don't," Gabriel warned.

Her hands emerged from behind her back. In one, she held a goblet, the other, a bright green bottle of Vin de León. Watching through the haze of her lashes, she murmured.

"I thought you might appreciate a taste of home, Chevalier."

"She found it in the cellar." Jean-François smiled. "A clever thing, our Meline."

Gabriel scoffed weakly, leaning back in his chair.

"Merci, madame."

Meline placed the cup down and reached under her voluminous chiffon skirts, producing a long, sharp dagger from a hidden sheath at her thigh. It was finely wrought silversteel—the very same dagger she'd stabbed Gabriel with in fact, when he'd attacked her master. Eyes locked on the silversaint's, she sliced the wax open with the blade that had done the very same to him—a silent little power play that delighted Jean-François no end.

Smiling, Meline poured now, the sound of wine kissing goblet and the duet of her heartbeat twined with Gabriel's thrilling the vampire's skin. Try as he might to resist, the silversaint's eyes drifted again to the milk-white promise of Meline's throat, and beneath that hungry gaze, Jean-François saw his majordomo flush. She was bound by blood to the Marquis, faithful and true, and she hated the silversaint for hurting him. But more than anything, Meline wanted to *please* Jean-François, and she knew little would please him more than sharing her with the man she now knelt before. In truth, Jean-François knew it would please her too. The bliss of the Kiss was a rapture unmeasured.

But being Kissed twice over …

“Will that be all, Master?”

Jean-François realized Meline was done, standing at his side once more. Gabriel snatched up the goblet, swallowing without pause, red rivulets spilling down his chin.

With no reply forthcoming, his majordomo turned to leave.

“My love.”

Meline stopped at Jean-François’s murmur, question in her eyes. Reaching out slow, he took her hand, drawing her back toward him. Meline’s gasp hitched in her throat, breath quickening as the vampire pressed pale lips to her wrist, scattering cool kisses over her skin. Gabriel had stopped drinking now, Meline staring at her master, Jean-François at the silversaint as his lips peeled back and those pearl-white fangs sank into her vein.

Meline moaned, guttural and trembling. She placed her free hand to her breast, as if to stop her galloping heart from flinging itself free. The rubied flood of life washed over the vampire’s tongue, hot, heavenly, filling his dead heart with living flame. But the vampire drank not long; one mouthful, two, gaze locked on the man opposite, thrilling to see Gabriel could not tear his eyes away. And with one last swallow, Jean-François released his grip, running a bright red tongue over Meline’s skin.

“That will be all, my love.”

“As it p-please you. Master.”

Meline managed to curtsey, almost falling. Gabriel tore his eyes from her bleeding wrist, filling his goblet to brimming. Jean-François opened his tome as if nothing were amiss, busying himself with quill and ink as Meline staggered to the door, steadying herself against the frame. Even after she’d left, a perfume of blood and want lingered in her wake.

“You’re a fucking bastard, coldblood.”

Chocolat eyes returned to Gabriel, ruby lips curling.

“Then I am in like company, Silversaint.”

Gabriel scoffed at that, and Jean-François laughed in kind, a fond smile shared between them. Pale fingers drummed on the tome, the air heavy and red. Glancing down at the bulge in the silversaint’s britches, the vampire sighed.

“My *God,* you look good enough to eat right now.”

“Perhaps it’s the wine talking. But you’ve looked worse.”

“That must be magik wine indeed.”

“All wine is magik.”

Jean-François chuckled. “Shall we get back to it? There is much left in your story to tell, and time is close to catching us, mon ami.”

"I thought time is meaningless to the timeless."

"On any ordinary night, surely."

"The Dyvok pressing your Empress of Wolves and Men to cut off my head, eh?"

"Dyvok." Jean-François yawned. "A paupered line, bereft of sovereignty. They press my Empress for nothing, Gabriel, save the scraps from her table."

"Then what's the rush, coldblood?"

Jean-François made no reply, buffing an imaginary speck from his talons upon his velvet lapel. But the silversaint stared hard, realization dawning in dark storm grey.

"The Voss."

"They are close."

"… *How* close?"

Jean-François shrugged.

"And where are the Ilon?" Gabriel demanded.

"Fear them, do you? Having slain their eldest?"

The silversaint leaned forward, eyes ablaze. He placed his goblet upon the table, not quite swift enough to hide the tremor in his hand.

"Where are they, Jean-François?"

"Peace, mon ami. You've nothing to fear from Kestrel, nor Kariim. Should you please my Empress, of course. But the sooner you finish your tale, the sooner you get your wish. Poor little Celene, looking into your eyes as the hell she so richly deserves yawns below her."

"Hell."

The bulge in the silversaint's britches had vanished entirely, grey eyes staring into the depths of that chymical globe. Thunder rocked the skies outside, lightning slicing bright upon the walls as Gabriel whispered.

"Did she tell you? My sister?"

"Your sister told me a great many th—"

"About the Five," Gabriel snarled. "Those priests of gods false and covenants broken. Your dear mama Margot was one of them, Jean-François. You *know* who they served."

"I know your sister is a liar." Pale fingers unstoppered the ink bottle, drew out his quill. "I know you are too. I know the Esani were a line drenched in depravity, and mired in madness. But of one thing above all I am absolutely certain, Gabriel de León. And *that* is the punishment I will suffer if I fail my Empress of Wolves and Men."

Jean-François dipped his quill, expectant. The silversaint still seemed subdued, casting his gaze to the thin window, the storm raging outside.

"You had liberated the City of Lions, murdering the Father of Whispers in the process. You had gathered an army, equipped with marvels from the mind of Fernando Cortez, forgemaster of León. Your cousin Charlotte, your brothers Aaron, Baptiste, and Lachlan stood united at your side. But the thirst was budding within you. That red madness that claims all palebloods in the end. And you did not even know Dior was alive."

Gabriel sighed.

"You're very good at this, vampire. You should become a historian."

Jean-François only smiled. The Last Silversaint took up his goblet again, leaning back in his armchair with the creak of soft leathers, of tired bones. He drank from his cup, the fruits of his famille's vineyards, withered now to dust. His hand was steady, the name of the daughter long dead inked across his fingers, glinting silver in the chymical globe's dull light. But as he drank, his gaze drifted again to the window.

And his pulse ran quick.

"What did you do next, Gabriel? Where did you go?"

"Where I was *always* going to go in the end, coldblood."

Storm-grey eyes drifted from the window to the vampire.

The silversaint shook his head.

"Hell."

BOOK THREE

TO KILL A KING

I met a man tonight. Walking near Le Cimetière des Mères. He'd hair like midnight, and skin like cream, and his eyes stripped me bare with a glance. He told me I was more beautiful than the night itself. And when I asked his name, his whisper seemed to me a spell.

"*Wulfric.*"

Wulfric.

I pray God I shall dream of him.

—Auriél de León
Un journal intime

I

FADED INK

“WE MARCHED. ACROSS vineyards bare and black. Over farmland run to ruin. Through villages forlorn and towns abandoned by all but fungus and rats. I’d been recruited into the Ordo Argent at fifteen years old, vampire. I’d given my blood, my sweat, my youth to the Silver Order. For *years* I’d fought. Witness to dozens of brothers put into the earth before their time, and brutality that still sometimes woke me in the dead of the night. But even after I was excommunicated, after I turned my back on war, a part of me still knew my sacrifice was worth it. That I’d left good men in my stead. Men who believed, who would *give,* just as I’d done—their blood, their sweat, their youth—to the ideal we’d all been raised on.

“That this world needs brave men to keep the monsters from the door.

“But as summer bled into autumn and we marched across Nordlund, I saw there was nothing left of my beloved homeland. Just a feast for the worms. A banquet for the crows. And looking to my brothers, men who’d given just as much as I…”

The Last Silversaint heaved a sigh.

“I wondered what the *fuck* it had all been for.

“I shared my dark thoughts with no one. We’d troubles aplenty on that road already, marching eastward with grim and heavy tread, toward our battle with the Forever King. An army of twenty thousand soldiers numbers *far* more than twenty thousand, coldblood. Armorers and fletchers, cooks and ’prentices, quartermasters and dogsbodies, all marched with us. In addition to the women in camp, a small cadre of nuns had also undertaken the journey from León; sisters of the Order of San Maximille. They sang hymns as they marched, wheels about their necks, intent to bring God's light to the battlefield. Knowing what we were headed for, I was grateful for their company. Even if the singing was a *bit* much.

"It would've been hard enough to move a force like that in times of plenty and weather fair. But now? Fording rivers. Skirting quagmires. Finding food. Shelter. Dealing with foulbloods. Sickness. *Laundry*. I'll not burden you with the fuckaboutery, Historian, seeing as you've never fought a battle in your life. But take it from one who lived it. That march to Elidaen was a slog through hell.

"Our plan was a simple one—pray to whatever God still listened that Fabién had failed to take Augustin during his winter push, and strike him before the next freeze, when the rivers still flowed and he'd be unable to maneuver. We'd no clue where he might be sheltering, but we knew he'd at least got as far as the Ranger River. So toward Elidaen we set our tread, slogging eastward through the slowly drying mire of Nordlund.

"We were a month into the march, making decent time all things considered. I'd bedded down after a hard day chopping lumber for a bridge to ford the Céleste. I'd have been content with a bedroll and canvas to keep the rain off, but Charlotte had unearthed my grandfather's old rig from his campaigns with Emperor Alexandre, and she'd insisted I take it. She commanded León's troops, true, but I was still a capitaine in their eyes, and though I was loath to set myself apart, the privacy was a blessing on that road.

"A brazier burned in one corner, keeping the growing chill at bay. I'd thick furs for carpet, a fine camp cot, even a good brass tub for washing off the road each night. A small writing desk sat in one corner, and by the light of a single, guttering candle, I reached into my greatcoat and opened the tome.

"Leatherbound. Bloodstained. Embossed with the initials *A.L.* It was strange, looking down at those timeworn pages. She was eighteen years gone, but I still recognized my mother's handwriting. Mama had taught me to read—I could remember sitting in the kitchen of our little house, her beside me, warm and patient. I'd no clue back then why the man I thought was my father treated me so cruel, but if there was one rock I set my back against when I was a boy, it was my mama's love. The ring she'd gifted me still adorned my finger—that silver signet, set with the lion and crossed swords of ma famille. And reading her journal now, visiting with the girl she'd been before the dame, the *lioness* she became, I felt her beside me once more.

"My grandfather's blood had soaked the journal when he was killed, and it took time and stone-hard patience to puzzle out most of the words. I'd made a solution of wicksalt and chalk—old Seraph Talon's chymistrie lessons still coming in handy after all those years. Painstakingly, page by page, I damped the bloodstains and drew them out of the parchment without ruining the ink. I'd honestly no idea what I was looking for. But the alternative was sitting in the dark, listening to that monster prowling behind the bars in my head. The thirst was stronger now. Fiercer. Leering with dripping fangs whenever I glanced his way, the remembered taste of iron and honey and bliss flooding my tongue with spit.

"All I'd seen, all I'd done in León still haunted my dreams. But beyond the memory of long black curls soaked with red, Odette's sighs warm upon my skin, I recalled the vision Dior's blood had gifted me. Wolves to the south. Ravens east. That burning star over the Bay of Antoine, and that hand—that black and burning *hand*—clawing upward from the Zamesk Mountains, above the ruins of old Charbourg, and tearing the sun from the sky.

"But what any of it meant?

"I'd not the first fucking clue.

"*I met a man tonight.*

"My heart quickened as I read those words. They were blurred, black ink smudged to purple against pages still rouged with blood. But mouth gone dry, I puzzled through the rest of the entry, dated thirty-five years back, knowing at last what I'd found.

"A fateful moment from the depths of time.

"How many lives touched by it? How many deaths purchased through it?

"What would this empire have been without it?

"And it stared at me from the red mists of the past; the name of that man, that *monster* who'd seeded but never loved me, and yet to whom I owed near all I was.

"*Wulfric.*

"'Gabriel!'

"The shout dragged me from those pages, those feelings perhaps yet unreckoned with, knuckles dragged across tired eyes. It was Baptiste calling, and though a cry past sunset usually meant another attack by roaming wretched, his tone was joyous.

"I set aside Mama's journal, rising and strapping Ashdrinker to my waist. I'd heard somewhere that old folk falling into dotage would fall slower the more company they kept, and so I'd been careful to talk with her every eve, speaking of past battles and glories, trying to keep her rooted in the here and now.

"'Godmorrow, mon amie,' I told her. 'How do you feel?'

"*P-p-p-p-p-passing fair, my friendmyfriend, how d-d-doth sweet night find ye?*

"'Still alive. Fancy coming to look at what Baptiste is shouting about?'

"*Aways and everever at y-y-your side, Gav-Gav-Gavrael.*"

"Gavrael."

The Last Silversaint glanced up as the historian spoke.

"Hmm?"

"That name she called you." Jean-François regarded the man opposite him, eyes glittering. "Gavrael. I know what it means now. I know to whom she thought she spoke."

"She was speaking to *me*."

"Book of the Redeemer. Chapter two, verse thirty-nine."

"Never was one for memorizing scripture, vampire."

"*From Evangeline came Temperance, and Eirene, Hope, and great Raphael bestowed Wisdom, that the Redeemer might rule justly over the kingdoms of this earth. But that His enemies would fear Him, grim Mahné gave the infant dominion over Death, and Sanael, the secrets of the Blood, and Gabriel, the Fire that would burn the pathway to His throne.*"

The Last Silversaint pawed his stubble, sighing. "*And Heaven's King was pleased.*"

"The Blade of the Redeemer. Given unto God's son by your holy namesake." The historian shook his head, near bewildered. "Ashdrinker. The sword of an *angel,* that laid the army of King Thaddeus low with a single stroke. That drenched the earth of Elidaen red with the blood of the nonbeliever, and carved the road toward his kingdom on earth."

"For all the good it did him."

"And it was given to *you*."

Gabriel shrugged. "Isabella *was* quite fond of her champion back in the day."

"That was how you killed Tolyev at Crimson Glade. Broke the siege at Tuuve. Slaying ancien of Dyvok, Chastain, Ilon, though barely more than a boy. *That* was how you carved a legend that burned so bright in a handful of years, Gabriel. You were not the greatest swordsman who ever lived. You simply wielded the greatest sword ever forged."

The silversaint smiled, sipping from his cup. "I told you when we started all this, Chastain. Legends often swell in the telling. And ever in the wrong direction."

"And you hung her on a *mantelpiece*. In some dank lighthouse off the coast of Alethe. Were you so embittered when they cast you from the Order that you'd deny them such a weapon? Think what your silver brothers might have done with her. How many more lives saved? How many more victories won?" Jean-François shook his head. "I always knew you were a bastard, Gabriel. But never did I realize before now what a selfish brat you are."

"It's naught to do with selfishness. All to do with love."

"That you felt a fondness for her—"

"Not *my* love." Gabriel shook his head. "Five years we fought together. Five years of the greatest terror and triumph any man could imagine. But though it cleft my heart in two, when they cast me and Astrid from the

Order, I told Ashdrinker she should stay. That Lachie could have the wielding of her, that she could still make a difference. But truth is, she was more than a blade by then. She was my friend. All our other friends had abandoned us, and though she knew what it might cost, she…”

Gabriel swallowed hard, eyes shining now.

“She didn’t want to leave me and Astrid alone in the dark.”

Chagrined, Jean-François fell silent, looking to the floor. The Last Silversaint took another gulp from his goblet to steady his voice.

“Walking from my tent, I spied Baptiste by a bonfire at the heart of the camp, gathered with a few dozen soldiers around a pair of horses. The beasts had been ridden hard, steam rising from lathered flanks. The first was my noble Argent, the big gelding snorting for joy as he saw me. The second was a brilliant black stallion named Eclipse, seventeen hands high; the pride of the Baron de León’s stables.

“He’d hated his rider at first; just as afeared of the Dead as any beast of earth and sky. But after Charlotte gifted him as reward for service to the City of Lions, his new master had fed him, three times over three nights, and now he was as loyal as my old Justice.

“Aaron slipped from Eclipse’s saddle, pressing one pale hand to the stallion’s cheek in thanks. A good distance away, Lachlan swung off Argent, boots striking the muddy ground and sinking ankle-deep. The pair had ridden countless miles over the past few weeks, and Lachie was spattered head to foot with grime. By contrast, Aaron was somehow near spotless, hair spilling about his shoulders in golden floods. As Lachlan loosed his collar, Aaron winced at that burning ink, turning away. Baptiste stepped forward, embracing his husband, pressing warm lips to his cold cheek.

“‘You’re back,’ he smiled. ‘I’ve missed you.’

“‘We were delayed at San Michon,’ Aaron muttered. ‘Lachlan was—’

“‘Aaron.’ Baptiste deepened the embrace, squeezing tight. ‘I *missed* you.’

“Blue eyes fell as Aaron murmured. ‘… And I you.’

“‘Well, that’s the sorriest sight I think I’ve ever seen in my life,’ I said, striding through the gathered soldiers. ‘You look every inch a pig’s arsehole, youngblood.’

“‘Fuck off, old man,’ Lachie grinned, clasping my offered hand. ‘I’m about as far from in the mood for yer shite as I’ve ever been in my life.’

“*Oh p-p-p-p-prettyone! Prettypretty, so pr—*

“‘Ash gives her greetings. I think she missed you more than I did.’ I looked to Aaron, eyebrow raised. ‘What news? You made it to San Michon?’

“‘Oui.’ My brother nodded, extricating himself from Baptiste’s hug. ‘Although as you might imagine, I kept well clear. Lachlan ascended the sky platform to the monastery alone.’

“‘Anyone there?’ I asked, heart rising in my throat.

“‘A few sisters of the Sorority.’ My old ’prentice shrugged. ‘Old Keeper

Tasha. Sœur Caoimhe and Marion, Valérie and Reneé and wee Lea. They'd heard nae word nor whisper from any 'saint, though. Like we thought, most of the brethren aready marched with me to Maergenn. And from there, to their graves.'

"Green eyes drifted to Aaron at that, but received no reply.

"'So you found *no one*?' I demanded. 'Not a single s—'

"'Hold yer fuckin' horses, ye'll give yerself heart seizure.' Lachlan paused, taking a long swig from a waterskin before continuing. 'I thought to restock afore I left. Silverbombs and shot, like. Chymicals and sanctus that wasn't cooked from damned foulblood.'

"'Leaving me to wait down in the mud alone,' Aaron said.

"'Ye survived fine, ye bloody blouse.' Lachlan scowled at Aaron before looking back to me. 'But while I was loading up, a lone brother returned home. He'd been on the Hunt in Sūdhaem. Tolman the Scarred, his name.'

"'Never heard of him.'

"'He joined the Order after ye were excommunicated. Quiet as a dead churchmouse and ugly as a hat full of arseholes, but he's a good man. I sat him down with some of Frère Benedict's homebrew and spilled everything. The Battle of Maergenn. The Blackheart's death. The Grail's fall. Took a few pints to swallow it, and he wasn't turning cartwheels about ridin' wi' the man who slew Greyhand. But he agreed if there's some small chance to end Fabién, better than none a'tall. And with León's army now with us…'

"'Another silver brother to our number.' I sighed. 'I'd hoped for more, but…'

"'There *are* more. Tolman knows where Carlos and Valentino are.'

"'The Brothers Beaufort,' I breathed. 'Holy *shit,* those bastards are still alive?'

"Aye. They're southeast. Burnin' out some Ilon bastard rooted in Madeisa. Even now Tolman rides to fetch them. He knows our road; they'll meet us on it, swift as they may.'

"'Sweet Mothermaid,' I grinned. 'Three more 'saints. *Good* work, brother.'

"'Nae just an astonishingly pretty face, old man.'

"'Any troubles on the road back? We've been running into a lot of wretched.'

"'Naught I couldn't handle. Though it was handy to have an extra blade about.'

"'Such praise.' Aaron unslung Epitaph from Eclipse's saddle, his tone dry as dust. 'Careful you don't choke on it, á Craeg.'

"'Choke on *this,* ye poncy fuckin—'

"'You've returned.'

"Lachlan fell silent, turning toward the voice. My heart twisted as I saw the fire come into his eyes—the same that had once filled mine when I'd looked upon my bride. My cousin Charlotte stood silhouetted by the campfire, the burn scars on her face near hidden by the curtains of her hair. She'd been abed obviously—boots unlaced and shirt thrown on backward. But she did a fine job in keeping her voice cool as she met Lachlan's eyes.

"'You look … well?'

"'Aye.' He paused, adding with haste, 'Ye also.'

"Another pause.

"'Look well, I mean.'

"Dragging her hair farther over her face, Charlotte risked a teasing smile.

"'Merci. Although … perhaps a bath might be in order?'

"'An excellent proposition, mademoiselle.'

"'Not with *me* of course, I didn't m—'

"'Nono, I wasn't—'

"'Oh, *God,*' Aaron groaned, stalking off across the camp.

"I looked between the pair, offering my old 'prentice a pat on the shoulder.

"'Good to have you back, Lachie.'

"With a nod to the de León soldiers, the tip of an imaginary tricorn to my cousin, I strode back toward my tent. Ashdrinker was murmuring some dirty limerick in my head as I walked swift across the muck, mercifully getting out of sight before I staggered.

"I bent double, one hand to my belly, just trying to breathe, to calm my thundering pulse. The scent of it lingered, haunting, that beast throwing itself against the bars in my head so hard I gasped. Ash had stopped singing, and I could feel her concern swelling as I finally stumbled inside my tent, curling up in a miserable ball on my cot.

"*Ye are unwellwell.*

"'I'm f-fine. Don't fret on m-me.'

"*What i-i-i-is wrong?*

"I curled up tighter, saying nothing, knuckles white on her haft.

"*Gabriel?*

"'Too many p-people,' I hissed. 'Someone was bleeding. Cut himself shaving or some bollocks. The s-smell of it these n-nights … even a scratch…'

"*Oh, my poor f-f-friend.*

"'It'll pass in a m-minute. Just leave me be, Ash.'

"*Why would I d-d-d-do that? I love ye, Gabriel. Ye n-need not suffuffuffer alone.*

"I clenched my jaw, eyes shut, snorting the red perfume from my nostrils and dragging my knuckles across my nose. Rolling upright, I dug about inside my greatcoat, fishing out my pipe and sanctus. As I filled the bowl with shaking hands, the monster within me roared, indignant that I'd try to sate it with such weak fare, urging me to rise, to *hunt*—

"I lit the pipe, dragging bitter crimson smoke across my tongue, into my lungs, nothing close to the thing I truly wanted. I saw Odette’s face then, her mouth open, her eyes rolling back in her head as I sank inside her. I felt the warmth of her skin, heard her groaning as I drank, drowning the memory beneath another red lungful and staring that monster in the eye as it prowled behind my bars. It wanted to destroy me, I knew. Consume me.

“*Become* me.

“Tonight I was strong enough to keep it caged. But it had broken free once already, and I knew it was only a matter of time before it took me again. My fuse would grow shorter, the nights between victims fewer, until there was only thirst.

“But I had to hold on. For my vow. For vengeance.

“Once Fabién was dead …

“I looked down at Ash, that silvered dame ever smiling, her counsel ringing in my head. It was a lovely thought, that I might lean upon her and others to lift this weight. That I need not carry it alone. But the hours past midnight stretch endless, and the weight is all in your head, and in the end, that dreadful choice is ever yours. *Only* yours. Any pipefiend or bottlehound will tell you, Historian; the only weapon in the war against yourself is *yourself*.”

The Last Silversaint shook his head and sighed.

“Of course I was alone.”

II

WHAT WE WERE

"There is a darkness in my love.

"When my Wulfric is with me, I feel as if there is no one else under heaven. Lying in his arms, I fear my heart will burst. But sometimes I find him staring at me with such sorrow in his eyes, it cleaves my very soul. And sometimes when he loves me, afterward he cries.

"My Wulfric tells me I have saved him and all the world, but he will not say from what. He speaks of vows broken and duty abandoned, and he asks if I think he is a good man. I tell him that I could not give him my heart if it were otherwise. But then he looks north, across the ocean, and a shadow comes over him, and he will not tell me why.

"There is a darkness in my love.

"And it frightens me.

"EACH DAY WE journeyed east, Historian, and each night I deciphered a little more of Mama's journal, drawing the blood from the pages and pondering the puzzle of her words. What I would've given for just a few minutes to speak with her. To ask all I wished to know, but more, to tell her how sorry I was. She'd been but seventeen years old when she met my father. No idea of the web she was being drawn into, nor the monster who wove it.

"Reading Mama's stories of him, I felt only contempt for Wulfric at first.

But the more I read, the more I wondered if in some way he'd not truly cared for her. The way Mama wrote about him made it sound as if Wulfric wished to set aside his duties to the Esani and seek a life with her. It was foolish and I knew it—any immortal love will wither with the mortal beloved. But he *seemed* conflicted, and I wondered why. The Esani were fanatics. Celene was Wulfric's acolyte, and she'd been *obsessed* with their perversion of the Faith. With the ideal of redeeming the souls within her and all the empire besides.

"Did Wulfric *really* consider abandoning those duties for love of my mother?

"And how would breaking his vows *save* him, or the world?

"Perhaps he was simply mad, as Jènoah had been.

"God knew I could sympathize with that …

"Three more weeks had passed, and my thirst had me by the *throat*. We were almost in Elidaen now—shadows of the Orhomme Mountains smudging the eastward horizon. Our soldiers were in decent spirits considering, and they were kept fighting trim through a combination of morning drills led by Lachie and Charlotte, and nightly attacks from wretched. There was no form or coordination to them—these were starving foulbloods too far rotted to understand anything but *food* and *thirsty*. But the skirmishes kept the men sharp, and Lachie, Aaron, and me well supplied with blood.

"Still, Aaron was ill at ease. Though things were a touch better between him and Baptiste, they were nothing close to good. The presence of Fernando Cortez among our army certainly didn't help, and though Aaron knew Baptiste had been under the spell of Ilon's blood when he'd dallied with the forgemaster, my brother had little fondness for the man who'd made him a cuckold. It might've been wiser to leave Cortez in León, but maintaining those wondrous mechwork bows for a force this size took a small army of blackthumbs, and we'd need every advantage when we faced Fabién.

"But truth told, Cortez wasn't the real problem. Baptiste still wanted what Aaron refused to give. And for fear of succumbing to that want, Aaron kept his distance from the man he loved more than anything on earth.

"It was heartbreaking to watch.

"Being around Lachlan and Charlotte wasn't much easier. My cousin clearly fancied my old 'prentice, and Lachie was smitten as hard as any man I've seen, poor bastard. But between them and any chance of joy was the promise Lachie had made.

"To himself. To the Order. To God.

"Lachlan had been raised by monsters. The only mortal son of Tolyev Dyvok. Joining the Ordo Argent had done more than save his life—it had saved his *soul*. Charlotte was a godly woman, and I understood my cousin well enough to know she'd never ask Lachlan to betray a holy vow. And so, the pair of them danced around each other like powder and flame, absolutely terrified of what might happen if they touched.

“I was sat in Argent’s saddle that day, ahead of our column, pipe at my lips. Aaron rode beside me on Eclipse, pale and stately. He was swathed in his greatcoat of black and midnight blue, collar laced about his face, only ice-blue eyes visible.

“‘How fares your blade?’

“I glanced at my brother sidelong, but he didn’t meet my gaze, studying the distant foothills. I breathed red smoke as I replied, patting Ashdrinker’s hilt.

“‘Well enough. M. Cortez does good work.’

“A long silence swelled before Aaron replied.

“‘So I’ve heard.’

“I cursed, swiftly steering away from the topic of the forgemaster. ‘Not perfect work, mind you. Ash still gets confused about where and when she is. I try to talk her through it as best I can, but it’s hard on her. Part of her understands she’s forgetting, but not what she’s forgotten. And it breaks her heart to know she’s not what she used to be.’

“‘None of us are what we used to be, brother.’

“‘Sad but true.’ I nodded, drawing on my pipe. ‘But she’ll hold the course. Do what needs to be done, no matter the cost. She’s seen rougher roads than this, and we’ve not far left to travel now. I only have to hold it together long enough to end Fabién, after that…’

“‘You mean *she*.’

“‘… eh?’

“Aaron met my eyes then, ice-blue rimmed with red. ‘You mean Ashdrinker only has to hold it together long enough to end Fabién.’

“‘… That’s what I said, isn’t it?’

“Those cool eyes returned to the distant hills, narrowed now.

“‘You’re smoking an awful lot.’

“‘What of it?’

“‘Just an observation.’

“I glowered, jaw clenched tight. Aaron spoke soft into the rising chill.

“‘If you ever wish to talk—’

“‘No, I *don’t* want to talk, Aaron,’ I snarled. ‘Sometimes problems rise that you can’t jaw your way out of. Sometimes you need to climb the mountain alone. And *sometimes* the best friend in the world is the one who can keep their fucking opinions to themselves.’

“Aaron sighed.

“‘I was paleblood just like you, Gabriel. Before I lost what I used to be. I remember the Red Rites of San Michon. I remember those brethren who submitted to the abbot’s blade before they fell to the thirst. I remember the words they ended by.’

“‘*Better to die a man than live a monster*.’

“‘I know you will hold true until we face Fabién, Gabriel. And I will ride with you until the end. But if *at* that end you need someone…'

"Aaron looked at me again, and I saw blood welling on his lashes.

"'Someone to…'

"I breathed deep, understanding what he was offering.

"Knowing how hard it must have been to offer it.

"'… Merci, brother.'

"Aaron nodded, saying nothing else, ice-blue eyes once more on the distance. I thought about how we'd begun—two young pups in San Michon, bitter rivals, tearing at each other in our jealousy and rage. How far we'd come. For five years I'd been a hero of this realm. I'd liberated cities. Rescued nations. Saved thousands. And still I wondered in that moment what the *hell* I'd done to deserve a friend like him.

"Aaron raised his hand then, pointing yonder.

"'Look.'

"I turned, squinting in the strangled daysdeath light. Three horsemen were cresting the distant hills, riding slow toward us. Fetching my spyglass, I saw each wore tricorns, long black greatcoats embroidered at the breast with sevenstars.

"'Silversaints,' Aaron sighed. 'How wonderful.'

"'Lachlan!' I twisted in my saddle, searching the long column of troops slogging through the mud behind us. '*Lachie!* '

"My old 'prentice soon came galloping up to the front of the line on a grey sosya, Charlotte riding beside him. I tossed him my spyglass, nodded to the incoming 'saints, now less than a mile distant.

"'Looks like Valentino and Carlos. Don't know the third one.'

"Lachie raised the glass. 'That's Tolman. He's Blood Dyvok. Apprenticed with Khalid.'

"Aaron pursed his lips. 'And these … Beaufort brothers?'

"'Blood Chastain,' I replied, watching the 'saints draw nearer. 'Valentino and Carlos fought with Lachie and me in the Sūdhaemi campaigns. Good men. Better warriors.'

"'Paleblooded brothers?' Charlotte raised her brow. 'Born of the same vampire?'

"'They're twins,' Lachie nodded. 'Fierce as wolves and brave as lions.'

"'And they drink like fish,' I added. 'Or at least, they used to.'

"'You should get along famously then, cousin.'

"I scoffed. 'Alas, I've drunk every drop I brought from León. And these boys know I killed Abbot Greyhand. So if they're pissed, I've little to placate them.'

"The oncoming 'saints slowed their steeds thirty yards distant. They were armed to the teeth, greatcoats travel-stained, the whites of their eyes flushed red with the sacrament. The first unlaced his high collar, greeting us with a small nod.

“He was a handsome bastard, Nordish born, square of jaw and dark of eye. He wore a moustache and chinbeard, waxed to sharp points, and an iron-grey falcon perched on his shoulder, preening her feathers. Thick black hair was tied in a bun, and the tops of his hands were graced with bouquets of silver roses. My heart ached a little at the sight—I’d forgot it was my Astrid who’d inked the aegis on Valentino and his brother. The blooms were as beautiful as she who’d scribed them, already beginning to glow in Aaron’s presence.

“‘Frère Lachlan,’ the ’saint said gravely. ‘Chevalier.’

“Sharp eyes fell on my cousin, and the tricorn was doffed with practiced ease.

“‘Madame?’

“‘De León,’ Charlotte replied. ‘And it’s mademoiselle.’

“A dark eyebrow rose skyward. ‘In*deed*.’

“‘Valentino.’ I nodded. ‘Been a long time.’

“‘Perhaps not long enough.’ Valentino nodded to the ’saints beside him. ‘My brother Carlos you know. This is Frère Tolman. He doesn’t talk much, hence our fond friendship.’

“The second ’saint tipped his hat to Charlotte as he unbound his collar. Carlos was the slightly-less-fair of the Beaufort twins, in that subtle way only twins can differ; his jaw a touch less square and cheeks a little less sharp. Yet there’d be few in the empire who’d kick him out of bed for farting, and looking their companion over, I saw this third ’saint was as foul as the Beaufort brothers were fair.

“Lachie had named him Tolman the Scarred, and a glance told me why; the poor fucker was about the most battered specimen of humanity ever squeezed into a greatcoat. Deep claw marks rent his face, brow to chin, and his left ear had been ripped away entirely. He was also missing half his left hand—bitten off, from the look of things. By something *big*.

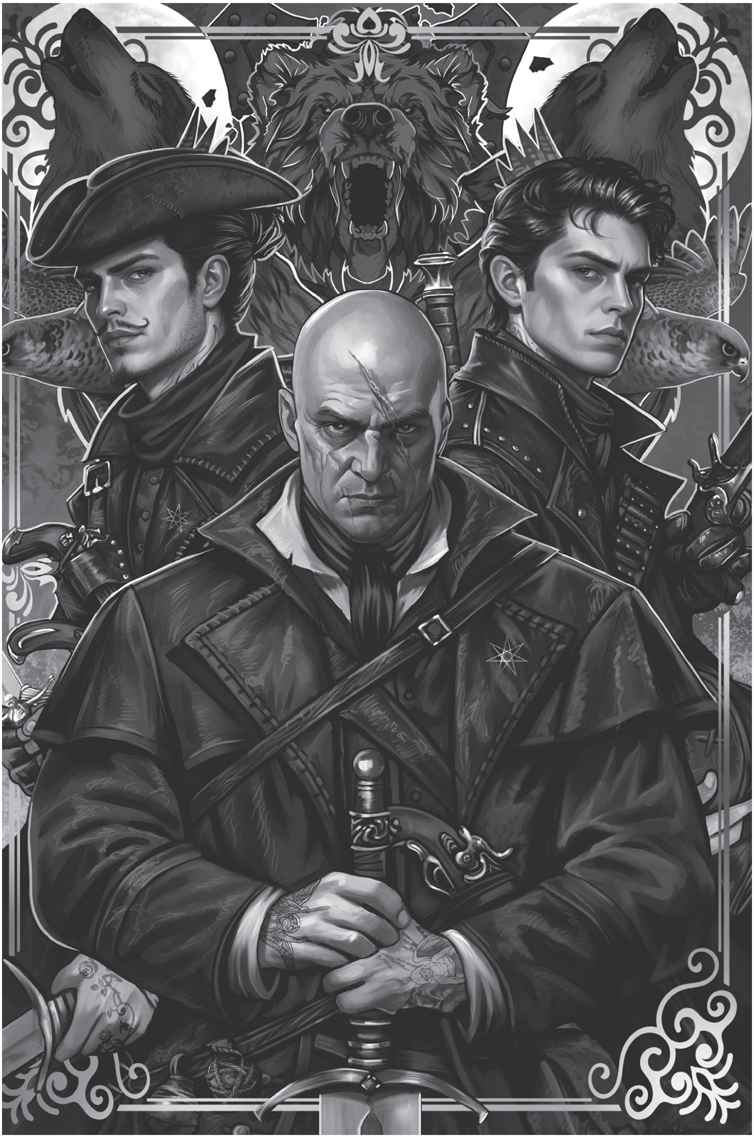
“He nodded greetings but didn’t speak, cold eyes fixed on Aaron.

“‘Merci for answering our call, brothers,’ I said. ‘Your blades are most welcome.’

“‘I confess, I’m still deciding where I’m honorbound to put mine.’ Valentino met Lachie’s stare. ‘It’s not often one sees silversaints in the company of the Dead, good Frère.’

“‘Aye.’ Lachlan threw a grudging glance to Aaron. ‘But this one helped slay Nikita the Blackheart. Most would say he’d earned a place here. Me among them.’

“Aaron smoothed back a golden lock from his cheek, lips pursed. And though he couldn’t long hold their stares for the light of their aegis, he met every one regardless. Carlos stared my old brother down a long moment before turning to me.



"'Word around the campfire is you were the one behind the massacre at San Michon. Greyhand. De Séverin. Fincher and young Beau. All slain by your hand.'

"'I'm sorry to say they were,' I nodded. 'But not without just cause, brother.'

"Valentino scowled. 'We *also* hear you've a way to end Fabién Voss.'

"'That I do.'

"Carlos glanced behind me, taking in the column of men in my wake. 'It's a nice army. And those crossbows *do* look a trick. But you've got, what, twenty thousand swords? They don't call it the *Endless* Legion for nothing, Gabriel.'

"'What number, the Voss forces?' Charlotte asked.

"Valentino's eyes slipped to my cousin. 'We know not, exactly. But the Forever King has ravaged all of northern Elidaen these last few years. And though the cost for his victories has been dear, he replenishes his numbers with every battle he wins. Voss has struck San Yves. Truepont. Isabeau. San Maximille. And finally, Augustin.'

"'Shit.' I glanced to Aaron, my belly sinking. 'He took the capital?'

"Valentino shrugged. 'Almost. Struck midsummer, we hear. I suspect the generals of the Golden Host hoped the thaw might stop him, but some fell magik follows his legions; a chill that kept the Béni frozen longer than it should've been. They cut over the river at the Vise, hit Augustin north and south. But then … they pulled back.'

"'Pulled back?' Charlotte blinked. 'Why?'

"Valentino nodded to the falcon on his shoulder. 'I know only what Eirene sees, Mlle de León. It *appears* Voss suffered a great loss. The smoke from the pyres at the capital could be seen from the horizon. But the imperial forces didn't pursue as he left. We've no knowing for sure if the legion was defeated, or merely retreated. What's certain is Voss retired to San Maximille to await autumn's end. And there he abides still.'

"'Then we have him,' I whispered, heart running quick. '*San Maximille.*'

"'Now hold,' Carlos said. 'Even if Voss *was* defeated at Augustin, this is still a fool's errand. Striking at the heart of his power isn't just a matter of dealing with him. Morgane, Ettiene, and Kestrel are all with him. That's *three* of seven Princes of Forever, Mothermaid knows how many highbloods, plus Fabién himself.'

"Valentino shook his head then. We'd fought and bled together, this man and I; more than a year in the Sūdhaemi campaigns. I've told you there's a bond forged in that kind of hellfire, coldblood, and a touch of old camaraderie crept into his voice as he spoke.

"'No man of woman born can slay the Forever King, Gabriel.'

"'I'm no man, brother. And I'm not killing him alone.'

"I reached inside my shirt, drawing out a metal vial on a silver chain. It gleamed in the grim daysdeath light; the most precious jewel in all creation. Tolman's piggy eyes narrowed, Carlos raised one black brow.

"'What is that?'

"'A weapon that can kill the unkillable. The Blood of the Holy Grail.'

"The twins stared at the vial as Tolman bowed his head, making the sign of the wheel. My chest ached to hold it in my hand, warmed from the beat of my own heart; the final gift Dior ever gave me. The very last drops I had left of her. Soon, this would be gone too, and all of her besides. But if it meant the end of Fabién, it would be worth it.

“Wouldn’t it?

“Valentino glanced at his brother, then to Tolman in question. The man rubbed his mangled chin with his mangled hand, threw a suspicious glance at Aaron. But finally, he nodded assent. And turning to me, my old battlebrother nodded.

“‘Seems your errand just found three more fools.’

“I grinned at that, nudging Argent forward. Valentino did likesame with his shaggy sosya, and as we met in the middle of that muddy field, we clasped hands, that old hell-forged fellowship made whole once more.

“‘Good to have you with us, brothers.’

“‘Oui. Despite it all, I confess, it feels good to ride at the Black Lion’s side again.’ Valentino grinned, his charm now full unveiled. ‘We should celebrate. Like old times.’

“Carlos chuckled. ‘Where would we find the donkeys? Let alone the midgets?’

“I sighed, looking mournfully at my hipflask. ‘We don’t even have a drink.’

“‘In that matter, perhaps I might oblige.’

“I turned as my cousin spoke. Though her face was scarred, cold, some small twinkle of amusement lit her eye as she met mine.

“‘Though I fear there are few donkeys and no little folk among our company, you’re not the only one to bring a bottle or two from León, cousin. I was saving mine for a special occasion.’ Charlotte dipped her head to the ’saints in respect. ‘It seems three noble brothers of the Silver Order joining our number is occasion enough.’

“‘Sweet Mothermaid, Charlotte de León,’ I grinned. ‘Your blood is worth *smoking*.’

“Her brow rose, smile turning wry.

“‘I’d really rather you didn’t.’”

III

THE SHARPEST EDGE OF WANT

"IT WASN'T THE grandest piss-up I'd ever attended, but it was definitely the most welcome.

"We'd trudged on through the day, catching our new fellows up on our trials. The road was rough as ever, but God's truth it was good to have more 'saints on it with us. The sight of grim Tolman and the handsome Beaufort boys soon had the men in high spirits; talk of our inevitable victory over the Forever King rolling down the line for the rest of the day's march. And as we made camp that night, to improve morale further, Charlotte produced five *crates* of Vin de León from her wagons—the last remnants of our grandfather's cellars.

"It had been weeks since I'd touched a drop, and my hands were fair shaking as I cracked the wax. Vodka and homebrew were also hauled from the stores, shared among the soldiers not on duty, and for that single, blessed night, beneath that black autumn sky, our camp was filled with merriments such as we'd not seen since León.

"Tolman spoke not a mumbling word, but it seemed he was a musician, slipping a twin-bladed flute from his greatcoat as we drank around the fire. And though he'd a head like a dropped pie, the music he played was nothing short of beautiful. The Beaufort boys and I spoke of old battles over a bottle, and my spirits were just as high as the men to have them with us. Our new recruits weren't an army, but one member of the Silver Order is worth a thousand men in a battle against the Dead, and we now had five in our company.

“The twins soon shifted focus to my cousin, and though he’d taken a vow of chastity like any other ’saint, Valentino was still a *shameless* flirt. Not to be outdone, Lachlan began fencing wits with the pair, and Charlotte found herself under pleasant siege. I’d noted she often hid her face, dragging her hair over her scars. But the attentions of the twins and Lachie coupled with the wine seemed to let her forget herself, if only for a night. Charlotte was laughing harder than I’d ever seen, cheeks pinked, lips rouged with wine.

“‘That *cannot* be true,’ she scoffed.

“‘I swear it!’ Valentino vowed, hand raised to heaven. ‘Neither of the young femmes in question were any the wiser, I assure you. Or if they were, they never raised objections.’

“‘But *surely* they could tell.’

“‘My brother and I are *twins,* Mlle de León.’

“‘Well, you are, but…’

“Here Charlotte glanced to Carlos, while Valentino scoffed.

“‘It’s aright, my brother knows perfectly well I’m the handsome one.’

“‘Certainly the louder one,’ Carlos muttered.

“‘My point is,’ Charlotte said, ‘you’re not *completely* identical.’

“Carlos shared a grin with his brother.

“‘All twins are identical with the candles blown out.’

“Baptiste got well merry, leading the singing as Tolman launched into a new tune—a bawdy ballad named *The Vicar’s Daughter.* Aaron stood on the edge of the firelight, the glow of silver ink ever keeping my brother apart. But he watched his husband singing in his rich baritone, more and more unbelievable conquests being added to the eponymous lass’s exploits, and in the final verse, as the general, pontifex, and emperor himself joined the fray, I saw Aaron begin to smile. The song closed, the blackthumb taking a bow as his audience cheered, and looking to his love, Baptiste found Aaron clapping too, an old light come into his eyes. The big man walked to his husband’s side, taking up Aaron’s hand, pressing gentle lips to his knuckles. Aaron shook his head and smiled.

“‘I love you, sometimes.’

“‘Only sometimes?’

“‘Most times, I just adore you.’

“Baptiste sighed, resting his brow against his beau’s.

“‘Stay with me tonight. We’ve no need to…’ He shook his head, drawing back to meet Aaron’s eyes. ‘I just want to wake with you in my arms. I want it to be like it was.’

“But Aaron’s eyes darkened then. And my heart dropped as I heard him whisper.

“‘It will never be like it was, Baptiste.’

“I watched them part, chest aching for the pair of them. I wanted to take

Aaron aside, find some way to have him see reason. But in truth, I'd troubles enough of my own without plunging into theirs. I'd had a skinful of wine by now—enough to see me stumbling, but not near enough to drown my *other* thirst. Ever it waited, roused by all these folk about me; the heat of the bodies, the songs of their hearts. The hole never filled. The empty always waiting. The truth impossible to deny.

"*You pay the beast his due, or he takes his due from you.*

"The hour was deeping, revels rolling on, and as is the way, I felt nature calling. With a nod to Lachie, I departed, wandering from music and firelight, bottle still in hand. Saluting a passing patrol, I chose a stretch of deadwood to serve as my privy; all tangled scrub and wasted trees, strung with asphyxia and blooms of luminous maryswort.

"Paleblood eyes searched that long and lonely night, and I thought of my Astrid then. She still visited my dreams, but not near as often as she used to. I was afraid I was forgetting her. And there in the black, far from firelight and song, I imagined her arms about me, the lips of my bottle no substitute, guzzling the last and hurling it into the dark.

"'Sweet *fucking* Mothermaid!'

"The cry followed a *crash* of breaking glass. With a curse, I pushed through scrub and dead saplings, finding a soldier in León colors. A young fellow, perhaps eighteen, new mail and sword unnotched. Nordish born he was; long dark hair and darker eyes. He was clutching his face, but even before he took his hand away, I *smelled* it, like a broken bottle to my belly, and as he turned to me, hand falling and that flood spilling, *spilling* bright and red from the slice in his cheek, I knew.

"I *knew*.

"'You're bleeding,' I whispered.

"'Pig-eyed, *shit*-witted fool, what in the name of mighty—'

"The lad paused, dark eyes going wide as he recognized me.

"'Chevalier? Did … d-did you just throw a *bottle* at me?'

"'Apologies, I didn't mean…'

"My eyes drifted to that slick of brilliant red, on his fingertips, slipping down his cheek. His jaw was pale, undusted by stubble, the scent uncoiling like a viper in my belly and sliding up my slowly closing throat.

"'Shit.' He touched the wound, squinting at bloody fingers. 'Is it bad?'

"I whispered then, the only truth in that long black night I was sure of.

"'*… No.*'

"'Apologies.' He shook his head, trying a brief chuckle, tucking one dark lock behind his ears. 'I meant no offense, Chevalier. Just … startled me, is all.'

"'We're a long way from the fire,' I heard myself say. 'Shouldn't be out here alone.'

"'Had a bit too much to drink. You know how it goes.'

“I could smell the vodka on his breath now, under the far-headier perfume of that ribbon of lush, gleaming *life,* dripping thick and hot from his chin. My gaze drifted to the slice in his cheek, pale skin riven crimson by that trail of blood, *blood,* trying to ignore the storm of my pulse, the depth of my want, the beast within slamming itself against the bars, over and over and ov—

“‘Are you aright?’

“‘No. You’d b-best be gone, boy.’

“‘Sweet Mothermaid, you look ready to fall; here, sit, Chevalier, sit.’

“He guided me to a weeping elm on colt’s legs, and I could feel the warmth of him, hear the pulse of him, so loud and near I almost wept. He sat beside me, enveloping me in his perilous perfume. My eyes were closed tight, *tight* against the sight of that red. But I could hear the teasing smile in his voice.

“‘I thought you legends of the realm could hold your liquor. You look like you’ve had quite enough to drink yourself.’

“‘I fear not n-nearly enough.’

“‘I’ve a hipflask, if you’ve a fancy? Something to keep us warm?’

“He paused then, drawing breath, all my senses so enflamed that over the song of his quickening heart, I could hear the rasp of his tongue across his lips.

“‘Unless you…’

“I opened my eyes, saw him gazing back at me, lips parted, breath coming a touch swifter. He was pretty. Young. Half-rattled by the bottle blow and liquored enough for inhibitions to crumble. I could see it in him now, as I saw it often. That dark and perilous *wanting*. Like I’ve said, some loathe we palebloods, Historian. Others adore us.

“But none ignore us.

“‘There are…’

“He licked his lips again, eyes roaming the woods before returning to mine.

“‘There are other ways we might keep warm.’

“I swear God I didn’t want to. No thought behind the motion at all. But I found my shaking hand rising to that pretty face, warm and smooth beneath my fingertips. He quickened, stiffened, swallowing thick as I brushed my thumb over that dark and viscous red. His hand sought mine, drawing it down, smudging the blood across his lips as he drew it into his mouth. He sighed, lashes fluttering, groaning as he suckled, licked, biting soft.

“He let my hand slip his mouth, eyes glazed as he whispered to the night.

“‘My name is—’

“But my thumb pressed back upon his lips then, hushing him.

“‘I don’t want to know.’

“And my hand closed around his throat.”

Silence rang in the cell, the vampire’s quill fallen still. He sat motionless, staring at the man opposite, chocolat eyes gone wide and ruby lips parted. But the quiet stretched on, the Last Silversaint staring at the chymical globe between them, that pale moth beating frail wings ever upon the glass, hopeless and fruitless.

"Is that it?"

Gabriel looked up, brow raised. "What?"

"You heard," Jean-François scowled. "You ravage some fresh young stallion up against a tree in the wilds of Nordlund and *that's* all you're going to give me?"

"I'm not *giving* you a fucking thing, coldblood. I already said I'll not bare my soul for your amusement, and you're no priest to shrive me of my sins."

"There's no shame in it, Gabriel." The historian shook his head in wonder. "I've told you before, beauty may be found across any boundary. Especially for we who are forever. Blood knows not the meaning of sin, nor mortal man the sharpest edge of want. You are what you are, just as God made you. Beautiful and horrifying, perfect and—"

Gabriel raised his hand.

"Spare me the sermon. You know what you need to know. The night may be long but this story will be longer if I'm to give you your jollies *and* your Empress her truth."

Jean-François rolled his eyes. "You grow more like your sister every minute, I swear."

"*Now* you're hurting my feelings, Chastain."

The vampire scoffed. Meeting the silversaint's eyes, he began to laugh, and his prisoner laughed in kind. Despite the grim surrounds, the pair chuckled together like old friends then, Gabriel grinning as he drained his goblet, dragging tattooed knuckles across his mouth. Jean-François found himself staring again, smile fading as he fell into Gabriel's eyes.

"I say you're like your sister to provoke you. But in truth … I think perhaps you're more like me. You know, if talk of sating your thirst embarrasses you…"

A blood-red tongue flickered across soft lips.

"You need not *talk* about it at all."

Jean-François threw a meaningful glance to that ironclad door. In the thin slice of torchlight beneath, both could see the shadow of Meline, stood dutifully outside.

"Thirsty?" he whispered.

Their eyes met.

The dark deepened.

And filling his goblet, the silversaint rolled on with his tale.

IV

ROAD OF GRAVES

“I am with child.

“My hands tremble as I write these words. I can scarce read them for my tears. I have never been so afraid and I dare not tell a soul, but if I do not speak, I know I shall go mad.

“I did not think we could make a life, Wulfric being what he is. When my moonstime did not come I prayed Mothermaid I might be wrong, but still I sought a wisewoman in the Night Market. Aunt to the blacksmith’s boy, Castia. She pricked my fingers twice for the moons, opened a whitegull and augured in the entrails. And then she placed her hand upon my belly and spoke with nothing short of terror in her voice.

“‘You must be rid of it.’

“But I cannot commit such a sin. God would never forgive me. Wulfric loves me true, he will know what to do. He will stand by us, his love, his child. I know it in my heart.

“My God, what will Father say?

“I’D STARED AT those words for hours the night before, and on the road the day after, they’d not leave me. Though I still felt Mama’s presence as I slowly deciphered her blood-soaked journal, I felt a growing sorrow also. I knew how her story ended, after all. The mud of Lorson. A blacksmith’s hovel. A lioness caged.

“God, what she’d given for me …

“We’d been rolling onward, eastward, into the rising winds another week. Though we knew not what we’d find there, we knew our destination now—San Maximille, the Shield of Augustin—and to that grim fortress, we’d set our tread. The men’s mood was still buoyed by the presence of the charming Beaufort boys and Frère Tolman, though admittedly spirits weren’t as high as once they’d been. We’d lost several of our number to wretched attacks the last few nights, and none were permitted to wander alone anymore.”

The historian pursed his lips. “Wretched attacks.”

“So our scouts said.”

“And what do *you* say?”

The silversaint took a long gulp of his wine, leaned back in his armchair.

“I’ll say I knew San Maximille would be a brutal nut to crack. The château was built to guard the capital’s northern approaches, and her defenses were no jest. We’d no idea of Voss’s numbers after his retreat or defeat or whatever the *hell* happened at Augustin. But Lachie and I had spoken long on our journey eastward, and his studies of the castles of Elidaen in the Great Library of San Michon had started to birth a sort of plan.

“Presuming we got to fight at San Maximille at all, that is.

“Our pace was good, but winter was coming. If Voss intended to assault Augustin again come the freeze, we’d have to roll *hard* to reach him before he marched out again, or risk facing him in the field without knowing his strength. And as we approached the Vipère River, we realized our pace could get *much* slower.”

Jean-François arched one brow, clearly unamused. “More tree-chopping? More bridge-building? Perhaps you could give me a thrilling account of how many potatoes you had for breakfast each day, or how—”

“No potatoes. Just mushrooms. And we’d no need to build a bridge over the Vipère.” Gabriel sighed. “That was the fucking problem, coldblood. There was one already there.”

“But … surely the Emperor’s troops would have demolished them as they retreated to slow the Forever King’s advance?”

“They *did*. But Voss rebuilt them.”

Gabriel breathed deep, dragging a hand back through his hair.

“Understand. The Dyvok *destroyed* Ossway in their haste to seize it. Tolyev had foresight enough to build the slaughterfarms at Triúrbaile, but the Blackheart just butchered anyone he conquered. For all his strength, Nikita wasn’t half the tactician Fabién was. Ancien Voss are nigh invulnerable. And with that imperviousness comes implacability. Patience. The Ironhearts rushed *nothing*. Fabién had been waging his war seventeen years by then, creeping ever eastward; not a fire incinerating all it touched, but a *poison,* soaking all the lands about him through with his stain.

“Carlos and Valentino were Blood Chastain, and they kept a pair of peregrines as familiars—two winged beauties named Evangeline and Eirene. From the skies, those falcons saw *far,* reporting back to their masters every hour on the hour. We knew the recently rebuilt Vipère bridge wasn't heavily guarded; a cadre of veteran thralls, well armed and fed on Voss blood, but no match for half a dozen 'saints. We tidied them up with barely more than a scratch, Ashdrinker reciting dirty limericks and a recipe for spiced potatoloaf in my head the whole battle. But as we were cleaning their blood off our blades, Evangeline circled down from dark skies, alighting on Carlos's arm.

"'She's troubled,' he said. 'Such as I've rare seen.'

"' Bout what?' Lachlan asked, rinsing his boots.

"The brother Beaufort spoke to the bird, petting her crown as she trilled reply. I saw his face run bloodless, a frown darken his brow.

"'Brother?' Valentino asked.

"'She speaks of a multitude. Many upon many, south of here.'

"'Wretched?'

"'Foulbloods, oui. Highbloods too. But more and most, *people*.'

"Lachie blinked at that. 'Thralls?'

"The falcon trilled again, and Carlos swallowed.

"*'Food.'*

"'Meat train.' All eyes turned to me as I struck my flintbox, red smoke on my lips. 'Voss needs to feed his legion in San Maximille, and he doesn't have the folk of Augustin to sate them like he planned. He's tapping the barrels in other cities he's conquered.' I looked to Valentino. 'San Yves. Truepont. Isabeau.'

"'Almighty God,' Valentino murmured, signing the wheel.

"'The Forever King has turned north Elidaen into his own personal slaughterfarm.'

"Spurring our horses, we rode across the Vipère bridge; five 'saints abreast and Aaron ever on the edge of our light. Storm winds clawed barren plains, the shadow of the Bouclier Mountains rising across the broken, southern foothills. Winter's coming chill was in the air as we thundered across heath and sod, not a word spoke between us. Carlos and his falcon led us to higher ground, sweeping abreast of a deep valley and along a rugged crest. And looking down through a deadwood riddled with fungal snarls, my belly sank, my heart with it, the horror laid out before me familiar, but no less obscene."

The Last Silversaint paused, leaning forward with elbows to knees.

"There's a coldness to your kind I've never truly understood, Historian. Part of me comprehends it on some base level, I s'pose. You murder someone every night to stay alive for a hundred years … I understand you might begin seeing them less and less as people and more and more as food. And I know we mortals are the same. When I was a boy, I spared little thought for the chickens that filled our supper pot. I've looked into the eyes of rabbits caught in my snares, seen how *desperately* they fight for just one more breath. I know what it is to take an animal's life to eat. And I know that's how you see us in the end."

Gabriel lifted his eyes, meeting the vampire's.

"But of all the animals beneath God's heaven, only humans weep. Pray. Plead. Only humans can look you in the eyes and beg '*Nono, don't take my child, take* me.' '*Nono, I have so much to live for.*' '*No, please. Just … please.*' And still … *look* at this place…"

Grey eyes drifted to the window, the world on its knees beyond.

"You've *slaughtered* us, Jean-François."

"*The wolf frets not for the ills of the worm.*"

Gabriel met the vampire's eyes as he recited the creed of his line.

"Do you believe that? Is that what you think of me? A worm not worth fretting on?"

"It matters not what I think, Gabriel. Only what my Empress desires. But in one matter, you are incorrect, mon ami. The Dead *also* weep."

Jean-François smoothed down his cravat, sighing.

"And if it brings any comfort, I think I shall weep for you."

Their gazes locked; storm grey and dark chocolat. The silence stretched between them, blood-red, pin-bright, finally snapping as the silversaint took up his goblet again.

"The meat train was below us. Wending along the valley floor. It stretched for miles; I mean *thousands* of people, vampire. Rag-clad and miserable. Stumbling and starved. They were guarded by hundreds of thralls in Voss livery, and packs of wretched led by grim, pale figures. The highbloods rode thralled horses, clad in dark steel and armed with the same, black cloaks whipping in that fell wind.

"Carlos shook his head as he looked down at the prisoners. 'Why don't they run?'

"Lighting my pipe, I shook my head. 'How far you think they'd get?'

"'Better to die on your feet a wolf'—the brother Beaufort struck his own pipe, inhaling the sacrament through sharpening teeth—'than be led like lamb to slaughter.'

"'No lambs are dying today.' I breathed red smoke, weak as water, thin as lies, nothing close to what I needed. 'Lachie, you, Carlos, and Tolman flank left. Aaron, me, and Valentino swing right. Cut through the mess and meet in the middle.'

"My old 'prentice looked to his fellows and nodded.

"'For San Michon, brothers.'

"I drew Ashdrinker from her sheath, the song of starsteel ringing in the wind.

"*F-f-for the living, Gabriel.*

"I looked down at the silvered dame in my hand, lips curling despite it all.

"'For the living.'

"And then we were off, a slow canter down the sod-clad slope, through the twisted woods. Dusk was approaching, and I wanted this battle well done before night fell; our foes were strong enough without dark as their ally too. Aaron was on my left, face grim, golden locks rippling behind him in the wind. To my right rode Valentino, twin longblades of silversteel in his fists, skin carved with bright lines of burning silver.

"We kept our approach slow and steady, but there were highbloods down in that meat train; ears and eyes sharp as knives. One soon spotted us—his great black steed rearing up as he cried warning. A pale princeling he was, with long red hair and a cruel scar across his cheeks. He was clad in black armor, wrought with a beautiful motif of grinning skulls. He pressed a horn to his lips, a bright peal splitting the skies as I roared the charge. And as we thundered down the slope, wretched unleashed in a flood toward us, Ash's silver song began in my head. A familiar song. A *Nordish* song from days before empire, a reminder that nothing and no one is lost so long as there are those who remember them.

"*The Soldier's Song.*

"*Once I had a brother,*
"*And we would play pretend,*
"*Of knights and blades and m-maidens fair,*
"*That we would fierce defend.*

"A swarm of wretched seethed up the hillside toward us, and though he stumbled for fear of the Dead, my brave Argent still held true. We crashed upon them, bodies flying, blood spraying, starsteel cutting Dead flesh like paper. Valentino stripped off his greatcoat, the glow of his aegis spilling over the battlefield, lighting all in a familiar shade of silver. But Aaron cursed, eyes narrowed as he set Epitaph loose among the Dead.

"I heard that highblood roar then. Snatching a glance, I saw folk in the meat train breaking from their line—desperately fleeing toward any chance at freedom.

"*But war it called my b-brother,*
"*Though I did fierce forefend,*
"*That he should fight in d-distant lands,*
"*With homeward f-fields to tend.*

"I wheeled about among the foulbloods, Ashdrinker's ballad filling my mind, no thought but motion, no moment but this. There's a savage poetry to be found in battle, coldblood. A music only those who've lived it will truly understand. And to that song I danced, Ash in my hands, *on* my hands, the thirst inside me seething at the scent of fresh blood rising in the air with the sound of fearful screams.

"Turning, I saw that red-haired highblood was riding down the fleeing prisoners, thrashing them with a ten-tail whip, unwilling to let such a bounty of blood escape. Lachie and his boys were hacking their way through a pack of wretched, hip-deep in gore and burning silver light. To escape the blinding glow from Valentino's ink, Aaron had broken from our sides, riding down another highblood—a slim femme in dark mail and a helm winged with raven's plumes, who'd decided discretion was the better part of valor.

"And so, toward that redheaded bastard, I set my charge.

"*But glory sought my b-brother,*
"*In soldier's boots to wend,*
"*T'ward golden prize and m-maiden's sighs,*
"*King's favor to ascend.*

"Argent made it almost to his mark, but the sosyas of San Michon were raised to fight around the Dead, and my noble tarreun was raised behind a pub in Redwatch. I could feel him balking as that pale princeling drew his greatsword and turned to face us, and to spare my boy his terror, I crouched on his saddle and flung myself into the air.

"Like a spear I flew, roaring as I came. The highblood charged toward me, blade drawn back in both fists, ready to meet the oh-so-predictable arc of my leap. But midair, I reached to my bandolier, drawing out my wheellock and letting loose. Silvershot cracked, sparks flew, the vampire's head whipped backward. And swinging Ash with a roar, enchanted starsteel cleaving plate and Dead flesh, I took his hand off at the wrist.

"With a scream he crashed to earth, metal buckling and sod spraying, greatsword flying into the muck. I landed smooth, only just now feeling it as I whirled to face him—a slick of blood, splashed thick and salty upon my face. I looked the highblood over as he rose, his mouth rouged an almost obscene shade of red, eyes flooded just the same.

"He was fresh fed.

"The blood in him still warm.

"And eyes locked on his, I licked it from my lips.

"He must have seen the *thing* uncoiling behind my eyes then, his own narrowing. I felt his mind pierce mine—no mere fledgling this one, but almost strong enough to be ancien. He rummaged in my memories and flooded my thoughts with fear, but the hunger, God, the *hunger* in me proved stronger than any terror. That red thirst, that *madness* rising like an eclipse upon my sun, blotting out all sense of who or what I was.

"I don't remember precisely how I cut him down. In the end, he must have tried to run, because when I finally fought my way back through that red mist, I was atop him, knee between his shoulders, fangs buried in his throat.

He was screaming—that trembling, soul-deep scream of the immortal looking down the barrel at his end. I was horrified at myself, mouth dripping red, the taste of him warm and sweet and washing me through. And I reared back then, appalled at what I'd done, *become,* Ashdrinker still singing that silver ballad as I raised her high over my shoulder and took off his head.

"*And Death he took my brother,*
"*So far from home his end,*
"*The King has lost but one more m-man,*
"*But I have lost my friend.*

"'Gabriel.'

"I turned, finding Lachlan behind me. He was shirtless, silverclad, aegis burning beneath the spattering of gore and ashes across his skin. My hands and knees were blacked with mud, my chin and tongue hot-slicked with blood, and though I knew not how bad I looked, from the look in my brother's eyes I could guess fair enough.

"'Ye aright?'

"'Still alive.'

"I spat, dragged my sleeve across my mouth, warm and sticky red. Looking back toward the meat train, I saw the coldbloods were all slain, the prisoners now gathered around my silvered brothers, clutching their greatcoats and hands as if to confirm that they were real. I saw in those people the bewildered joy of the condemned man, reprieved just as he steps onto the gallows. I heard them weeping, thanking God and Mothermaid, but more and most, praising those brave men who'd just risked all to save them. And I smiled to know that despite it all, we'd done some good that day.

"I marched toward them, intent to find out where they'd come from, or if they'd any word of Fabién's plan. But Lachlan grabbed my arm as I strode past.

"'Are ye *aright*?' he repeated.

"'I told you I'm fine, Lachie.'

"'I see it in ye, Gabe. Just as I saw in the forests of Fa'daena.' He shook his head, heartbreak in his bloodshot eyes. 'The *thirst* has ye. The sangirè.'

"*Once I had a brother,*
"*And we would play pretend,*
"*Of knights and blades and—*

"I slammed Ash into her scabbard, snarling.

"'You think I don't fucking *know* that, Lachlan? What would you have me do? Lie down here and bare my throat for your blade?'

"'Fuck no! Godssakes, I've no wish to see ye die! *Fight* it, Gabriel!'

"'I'm fighting it with all I have! The only way I can! We're only a handful of nights from Voss's throat, brother, and I'm no monster yet.'

"'Well, I'm sorry to tell ye. *Brother*. But right now, ye don't look much a man.'

"'Blood washes off, Lachlan.'

"'The hands, mebbe.'

"Those words were a slap, ringing in my skull, my fangs clenched tight. I saw Odette's face again then. That nameless soldierboy I'd found in the woods. That beast, prowling behind the bars of my eyes. I'd not long left, I knew it. But we were close now. So close I could taste it over the murder in my mouth. And I snatched my arm from Lachlan's grip, stalking off through the mire as he called behind.

"'What price victory, Gabe?'

"But toward my promise I marched."

V

A SORT OF STRATAGEM

“I told him.

“Hand to belly and tears in my eyes, I told Wulfric I carried his child. I’d hoped he would embrace me. That the love he whispered of when I lay in his arms would prove true, and that with a smile, oh that beautiful *smile, he would banish all my fears.*

“My God, what a fool I was.

“He was so *angry. A fury came upon him, turning storm-grey eyes to black, and he proclaimed the babe an abomination in God’s eyes. He told me a child of hell grew in my belly, spawn of the greatest sin ever committed, and I wept at his words.*

“I loved him true. I know he’d loved me, too.

“How could the fruit of that love be evil?

“He told me I must be rid of it. But already, I felt this gift, this life inside me, budding slow to bloom. And though he raged, still I told him no. The babe is blameless. And for me to snuff so fragile a flame when I should love it most in all the world would *be evil.*

“He fell silent at that. And if the rage I saw in him before was unmatched, so too then was the despair. He called himself a cur. A traitor. He told me this was God’s punishment for abandoning his oaths, that his love for me was not love, but simple, foolish pride. And he fell to his knees then, bloody tears in his eyes as he called to heaven.

"'I see it now, O Lord. I hear thee, O my God. All on earth the work of your hand.'

"*He whispered then, and it made me frightened but I do not know why.*

"'Let this blackened veil be undone.'

"TWELVE NIGHTS HAD passed since I read those words, and yet they haunted me still. I could see my mother in my mind's eye; a young lioness, standing between the monster and her cub unborn. There's no rage under God like that of the mother whose babe is imperiled. The same rage I'd seen in my Astrid's eyes as Fabién Voss sat at our kitchen table, our sweet Patience upon his lap, and his black eyes fixed upon my bride.

"*What is the knife for?* he'd asked.

"*You,* she'd promised.

"You.

"But more than the love I felt for my mama, a wrongness had settled upon my shoulders as I'd read her words. It had taken time to see it. Like the sigil of the Esani, etched into the doors of Cairnhaem, onto the tomb of Mother Maryn beneath Maergenn. Which was the truth of it? The two skulls? Or the chalice between?

"*From holy cup comes holy light;*
"*The faithful hand sets world aright.*
"*And in the Seven Martyrs' sight,*
"*Mere man shall end this endless night.*
"*Before the Five, come unto one,*
"*With sainted blade, 'neath virgin sun,*
"*By sacred blood, or else by none;*
"*This blackened veil shall be undone*.

"So went the words we'd unearthed in Maryn's tomb. The prophecy to bring back the sun. But daysdeath hadn't even *fallen* in the nights Wulfric knew my mother.

"There *was* no darkness yet across the skies.

"So what blackened veil had he been talking about?

"I could find no answer, within my own mind nor Mama's journal. The remaining pages spoke of her confrontation with my grandfather. His rage and her banishment, young Raphael Castia's declaration of love, and their decision to journey to Lorson. At the mention of my stepfather, I thought again of my sister. Wondering where Celene could be, if she knew the answer to this riddle, the *truth* of this damned prophecy.

"*The blackened veil?*

"But in the end, I supposed it didn't matter."

The Last Silversaint fell silent, gazing at the sevenstar on his palm. Jean-

François found himself staring too; those scars and beautiful tattoos. A wreath of skulls atop his right hand, roses upon his left, the word PATIENCE across his fingers, edged with silver sheen.

"This prophecy may be the greatest riddle of our age, Gabriel." The historian's eyes narrowed to knifecuts. "How in the name of *God* could it not matter?"

"I had more important things to fret on."

The silversaint tipped his head back, draining his wine in one long gulp.

"We'd reached San Maximille."

Reaching out slow, he filled his goblet slower. And from his bones, he sighed.

"We'd marched as hard as we could after liberating that meat train, spurred by the thought of other innocents languishing in Fabién's grip. But the prisoners we'd saved had numbered *thousands*—men and women and children, too thin and weak to fight. And though we'd no choice but to bring them along, they'd slowed our pace to a crawl. Winter had fallen before we reached the Ranger Valley, and by the time we drew close enough to scout San Maximille, the ground was thick with snow, rivers frozen once more. I was sure the château would be abandoned—Lachie and I were already drawing up plans to meet Fabién in the field. But though he'd had ample time to depart his fortifications, our scouts returned from the Shield of Augustin with unsettling news.

"Our enemy was still holed up inside.

"I couldn't quite fathom it. Augustin had been Fabién's goal for *years*. And now it was within his reach and he'd just … stopped? The rivers were frozen, the valley grey with snow, sulfur stench and roiling skies. There was nothing to prevent him marching forth. And still he waited, coiled like a serpent behind San Maximille's walls.

"It was a grim stretch of country, lashed by chill winds, but the local iron mines were worth an emperor's ransom, and San Maximille had been home to fifty thousand people in brighter days. The château and surrounding city were perched upon a fist of dark stone among rugged foothills, across a bend in the Ranger River. The city was walled, studded with high tenements, thin roads snaking up to the mighty fort above it. The river wending around its battlements might have proved another barrier were it not already frozen. But the bridge leading up to the maingate had been repaired by the Voss anyway, and there wasn't a single thrall nor foulblood guarding it. We could approach across the ice, over the bridge, attack from any direction we chose.

"It was almost too good to be true.

"'They know we're here.'

"Valentino shrugged off his greatcoat, the snows upon his shoulders scattering on the floor. Carlos threw his tricorn and gloves aside, warming his hands over a burning brazier. We were gathered in our command tent—

another souvenir from my grandpapa’s campaigns with the Emperor. It was a palace of canvas with a solid timber frame, those winds howling across the plains kept well at bay. Banners with the de León coat of arms graced the walls, furs covered the floors, and a grand map table was set at its heart, gleaming red and scattered with round stones. Valentino stepped up to his twin at the brazier, stomping the chill from his feet, breath steaming in the air.

“‘Yer certain?’ Lachlan asked. ‘They know fer sure?’

“Carlos nodded, Evangeline preening on his shoulder. ‘Oui. They were keeping their food stocks in the city around the château, but—’

“‘They’re not food, Frère Beaufort,’ Charlotte snapped. ‘They’re *people*.’

“‘Not to our enemy, Mlle de León,’ Valentino said. ‘You’re educated in matters military. If your city were about to be besieged, what would you do with your provisions?’

“Charlotte narrowed her good eye. ‘Bring them inside my best walls.’

“‘And our enemy has done just that. Every man, woman, and child in their larder, bought up to the château and locked behind their highest battlements.’

“‘Withdrawing further,’ I whispered, shaking my head. ‘Voss is *weak*.’

“‘Or feigning weakness,’ Carlos replied.

“‘How many men his number?’ I asked. ‘How many Dead?’

“‘Hard to say from the sky,’ Valentino shrugged. ‘But … not so many as I expected, I admit. A thousand swords, perhaps. Ten times that in wretched.’

“‘Think about it,’ I told them. ‘Voss lost bodies at Augustin. A *lot* of bodies. Pyres big enough to be seen on the horizon, you said. But unlike his other battles, he had to *quit the field* afterward. He couldn’t have his Dead feed on the wounded, nor replenish his numbers from among those who rose afterward. The Endless Legion stayed endless so long as the Forever King kept *winning*. And whatever the hell happened in Augustin…’

“I shook my head, pulse running quicker.

“‘For the first time in seventeen years … Voss is on the back foot.’

“‘We could give him what he expects?’ Carlos offered. ‘Lay in a siege? The train we liberated was intended to feed his wretched, he’ll have less to slake them now.’

“‘We have three thousand new mouths to feed ourselves, Frère,’ Charlotte replied. ‘Winter only deepens, and who can say how long a siege against the Dead might last? If we wait, we consign every man, woman, and child in that city to death.’

“‘What shape are they in? The fortifications?’

“This question came from Baptiste, stood near a second brazier. He was shaving his shovelblade jaw with a silversteel dagger, whetting the knife’s edge with spit.

“Carlos shrugged. ‘Considering the Forever King crushed this place a few months back, they've done a decent job repairing their own damage. But the sou'ward battlements are a little weak, and the eastgate looks as shabby as my dear brother's moustache.'

"Valentino punched his twin's arm. 'Watch the lip, pup.'

"Carlos grinned, rubbing his bruised bicep. 'Methinks perhaps the Voss smashed the eastgate down during the assault. They've cobbled it since, but it's definitely vulnerable.'

"'And the sally ports?' Lachlan asked.

"Valentino petted his peregrine's head. 'Eirene concurs with you, brother. Two of them. Right where you'd said they'd be. The slopway, too.'

"I stood beside Lachie, looking down at his creation with thundering heart.

"'This is our chance, then. We attack come the dawn.'

"Before my eyes lay a map of remarkable detail. It was not some parchment scribed in faded ink, but wrought into the map table itself. The table's surface was wax, ruby red, from days when flowers still grew in this cursed empire. A commander on campaign could scribe the lay of any encampment or keep or coastline into its surface with a metal quill, troops represented by hand-wrought stone pieces. It was weatherproof. Portable. Updateable. And when it was time to move on, the wax could be heated via a metal plate and allowed to cool, the surface now awaiting the next stop on the campaign.

"Lachie had told us he'd a fascination with castles of the realm, and while I'd ribbed him for the years he'd spent studying them in San Michon's library, that time seemed a gift now. Looking at the map he'd scribed—some from the Beaufort brothers' reports, but much from *memory*—I had to marvel. The detail was astounding; the Shield of Augustin's walls, towers, the town around, all etched with remarkable accuracy in that smooth red.

"Lachie waited for the others to gather about him. All our officers were present—Charlotte and her second, Mathieu, a handful of de León capitaines, circled by 'saints in black leathers. Aaron kept back as always, the glow of silver on bare hands and stubbled cheeks a soft agony to his eyes. Baptiste stood near, but not close enough to touch.

"'Aright,' Lachlan declared. 'Gabe and I have been ponderin' this riddle fer weeks. This is the best answer we've conjured. Even if Voss's numbers are as thin as they seem, it's still a stab in the dark, like. But with a bit of luck, the Forever King will end up wi' the same.'

"Aaron blinked. 'The same luck?'

"'The same *stab*. The stab in the dark. With a bit of luck, he'll get…'

"Lachie raised one brow, looking around the group.

"'Nae? Nae one got that?'

"Silence reigned in the tent, Charlotte clearing her throat.

"'Ah, fuck all o' ye then. What d'ye know 'bout funny, ye bastards?'

"'So,' I growled. 'We've no artillery, but enough siege ladders that our infantry can hit a good stretch of the sou'wall, covered by archers in the city below. Those flaming crossbows from M. Cortez will be a godsend among the wretched. But our real advantage lies in you lads.' I turned to the silversaints, nodding to each in turn. 'If the eastgate is weak, Lachie and Tolman can test it against the strength of Blood Dyvok. Meantime, Valentino and Carlos split in two and hit the sally ports. If either of you break through, fight to the gates, open them from within, and we rain down hell from without. Fabién has proved himself a master at attack. Let's see how he fares on defense."

TapTapTapTapTapTap.

The Last Silversaint glanced up, found the historian drumming his quill on the page.

"What?" he growled.

"Sally port?" Jean-François arched one brow. "I presume this is not some obscure reference to a dockside femme of negotiable affection named Sal—"

"It's a door. In a château's outer wall." Gabriel shook his head, bewildered. "You live in a castle, how the *fuck* can you not know this?"

The brow rose higher, the historian glancing toward the battlements beyond the window. "In your imagination, exactly how often do I go walking on those walls?"

"*Fuuuck* me," Gabriel groaned.

"As it please you." Jean-François snapped his fingers. "Meline?"

The door opened swift, his majordomo waiting faithfully on the other side.

"Master?"

"Our guest has succumbed to my roguish charms at last, my love. Be a dear and fetch my riding crop and leathers? Perhaps some rope? Silk of course, not th—"

"Stop taking the piss, vampire," Gabriel snapped.

"Well. A boy can dream." The Marquis glanced at his majordomo, calming her with a few soft gestures and a wan smile. "I jest, my love, you can wait outside."

"I…" Meline glanced between the pair, her heartbeat so loud all in the room could hear it. But finally, she curtseyed low. "Your will be done, Master."

The ironclad door closed on silent hinges, the lock again snapped shut. The pair were left alone once more, Gabriel dragging one slow hand down his face, Jean-François brushing his quill over that infuriating smirk.

"She's *delicious,* Gabriel."

"A sally port," the silversaint sighed, "is an essential part of any castle's fortifications. Good defenders will harry their attackers during a siege. Slipping out at night or during a lull in the fighting. Skirmishing, thieving, spying, then fading back behind the walls before the attackers can retaliate. But you don't want to have to open your maingates every time you send a man outside. For that, you want a sally port."

"A door?"

"Ironclad. Heavily defended. But oui. A portal, from which to sally forth."

"But…" The historian frowned. "Why build walls with moats and drawbridges and portcullises and then just put a damned *hole* in them? Is that not a point of weakness?"

"In days of old? Not really. It's a fucking door. Wide enough for *one man*. What's a general going to do, send a cadre of killers to line up neatly outside in the arrow and cannon fire while someone breaks it down, and then shuffle in single file to get their bollocks cut off? These ideas were born in nights when *men* fought *men*. And despite what the children's tales say, it's a rare battle indeed where a single man makes a difference."

"But you weren't men, Silversaint."

"No. We were *far* from men."

Gabriel set his goblet on the table, stroking his chin.

"All were staring at the map," he said. "Pondering the plan laid out, the road ahead, the blood promised with the dawn. Charlotte stood at Lachie's side, lips pressed thin.

"'It seems a *sort* of stratagem. Draw attentions to the battlements with infantry, then probe for weakness with silver hands and steel.' Her eye met Lachlan's, glinting in the emberlight. 'But I see what you mean about it being a stab in the dark. And I note the Black Lion of Lorson has yet to assign himself a duty. Pray, where will you find yourself, dear cousin, when León's sons are bleeding all over those walls?'

"'Where I usually find myself, dear cousin. In the shit.'

"Aaron chuckled. 'And I right alongside you.'

"'And *I* beside *you,*' Baptiste declared.

"Aaron met his husband's eyes, his own clouded and dark. 'No, love. Not this time.'

"'I'll not leave you to f—'

"'I *said* no,' Aaron hissed. 'You're no paleblood, Baptiste. You're a *blacksmith*. When we hit those walls, you'll be with the other smiths. In the reserve, feeding our archers.'

"Baptiste appeared ready to protest, but the desperation in Aaron's gaze quelled any rebellion. The big man bowed his head, and in the silence following, Charlotte raised a brow at Lachie. In answer, Lachlan tapped the map; an X marked along the banks of the Ranger, downriver from the mont upon which the great château stood.

"'Gabe's going in through the slopway.'"

TapTapTapTapTapTap.

The Last Silversaint hung his head and rubbed his temples.

"A fucking *sewage outlet,* vampire. A *slopway*. In brighter days, the Shield of Augustin garrisoned four thousand soldiers, and that again in hands. There was a whole city around it; they couldn't just fling their shit off the walls. They'd tapped an underground tributary of the Ranger, dropped their business into that, and let it wash away downriver."

The Marquis chuckled. "And *you'd* be crawling up it. How appropriate."

"Being a legend of the realm isn't all breathless maids and rumpled sheets."

"Pity." The vampire waggled his eyebrows. "It's been a while since you recounted a conquest. I was telling your sister earlier how talented you are at it."

"You'll get your jollies soon enough."

"… Meaning what?"

"Meaning a shout rang across the camp then. An alarm, rising in the dark outside. Grabbing up our blades, we *sallied* through the tent flap—"

The Marquis scoffed, rolling his eyes.

"—to see what all the fuss was about. We'd tripled patrols since arriving in the valley, and I saw a cadre in León colors marching through the ocean of tents about us. The men looked dour, dripping suspicion, steel naked in their hands. But when I spied the figure between them, my heart near flew from my chest.

"It'd been over half a year since we last saw each other. Our parting had been a wordless one. Perhaps a coward's one. I'd done my best to forget the silk of her skin, the fire of her blood, burying those memories in the past and vowing to think of her no more.

"It was only in children's tales everyone got a happy ending.

"But as we set eyes upon each other that night, all the time and blood and trials between us seemed to simply melt away. She looked beautiful as ever; the wildfire of her hair, that alloy of platinum and gold in her lion's eyes. She was clad in clancloth, her graven breastplate, the gold and bone woven into her slayerbraids singing as she broke into a run.

"*'Phoebe,'* I breathed.

"The guards cried out, but she pushed past, weeping and laughing as she ran toward me. I found myself running too, crashing into her arms and sighing as I felt our bones collide. All was brilliance, firelight ablur as I swept that lioness off her feet and twirled her in my arms, not believing what I held. And as I set her on the earth, still I refused to let her go, breathing into the fire of her hair a secret I'd have gladly shouted for all the world to hear.

"'God, I missed you.'

"She kissed me then. Rising on tiptoe and crushing her mouth to mine. I surged into her, no camp about us, no dawn attack, no world at all for one blessed moment. Just the softness of her lips, the warmth of her body, lifting me up on flaming wings. But the beast in me surfaced then, the red memory of her taste flooding my mouth with spit. And though it left me bleeding, I broke our kiss, pressing my brow to hers.

"'Missed ye too,' she whispered.

"'Seven Martyrs, what are you *doing* here? How'd you find us, what are—'

"'Gabe. Listen to me.'

"Phoebe placed one talon on my lips; a black razor, cutting off my questions. The feel of her body against mine, the memory of her taste and the echoes of the thirst had left my legs shaking. But at the next words she spoke, the whole world fell still, and I swear God you could've knocked me down with a whisper.

"'Dior *lives*.'"

VI

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

"TWO WORDS."

The Last Silversaint sighed, fingers steepled at his chin.

"I know I've said it before, coldblood. But it's strange how so much can be born of so little. How much power and peril can reside in such tiny things. Two words had tied my troth to Astrid, our promise we'd be together forever. Two words had invited Forever into our home, and begun the end of everything. Two words had been the last I spoke to my love, there in the tomb he'd left us, my bride cold and still in front of me, and my daughter's blood staining the stones above my head.

"*I do.*

"*Come in.*

"*Forgive me.*

"I'd lost all I cared for in this world twice over. Struggling to pick up the splinters with bleeding hands and stagger on toward the only thing left. *Vengeance*. I'd almost managed it. I was at the end of the road. Peace ahead. Quiet. Sleep. But again, my tiny world had been unmade by just two little words.

"*Dior lives*.

"Phoebe spoke to us in the command tent, by the flickerbright light of smoldering coals, beneath the standards of my house and the stares of men who'd been raised to see her kind as savages. She was too restless to sit, pacing like an animal caged, but I was sat on a stool beside the map table for fear my legs wouldn't keep me upright.

"God and Mothermaid, I could scarce believe it. After all the guilt. All the heartache. All the *what if*s and *if only*s, two words had smote all doubt to dust.

"Phoebe told us all of it. Aaron and Baptiste, Lachie and Charlotte, the 'saints all sitting in silent wonder as she spun her tale. She spoke of Dior's resurrection in Maergenn, her mustering of the Unbound, their journey on *Dawnseeker*. I'd cursed at that, counting months back in my head, thinking again of that vision I'd seen as I drank of her blood in León. Wolves to the south. Ravens east. That burning light over the Bay of Antoine—same as the star that had signaled Dior's birth all those years ago.

"It had been *her*.

"God, what a fool I felt then. A wretch for abandoning her. A cur for not believing in her. I should've known all along, Seven Martyrs, she'd *shown* me, my head now hung in shame. And in my mind's eye, again I saw that hand—that black and burning *hand*—clawing upward from the depths of Talhost, and tearing the screaming sun from our sky.

"Phoebe recounted the battle of Augustin next, the horrors and miracles she saw there. Streets awash in blood and bodies. Celene and Reyne's foolish bravery, standing and falling against Kestrel Voss. And finally Phoebe looked into my eyes and spoke of the change that came upon Dior, the *wolf* inside her unleashed. *Now* it made sense how she'd been delivered from the cold hands of death. How the scars she'd given me lingered, when others faded like light at sunset.

"'A *duskdancer*?' I breathed, touching my cheek.

"'My husband's daughter,' Phoebe nodded, old pain glittering in her eyes. 'The Anabh'Dhai was birthed of the Highlands after all, Gabe. Just as prophecy foretold.'

"I scowled, voice gone to gravel.

"'Prophecy.'

"And Phoebe spoke then. Of Maryn's words in Dún Maergenn. Of the meaning behind those verses carved beneath the Mothermaid's tomb.

"*The Sainted Blade.*

"*The Virgin Sun.*

"*Before the Five come unto one.*

"'Sounds like fuckin' *bollocks* t'me,' Lachlan growled.

"'I thought the same at first, Lachlan á Craeg,' Phoebe replied. 'But then I saw the love with which Dior's men followed her into battle. The way an ancien maebh'lair risked her *eight hundred years* to save that girl's life without thinking. The *terror* in the eyes of that Forever Prince as she looked upon Dior and saw what she was become. There's a…' Phoebe shook her head, awestruck. '… *divinity* to that girl. Unmistakable. She is spoken of in legends of the Faithful and Moonsthrone alike. And if anyone on this blackened earth has the power to end the death of days, this Time of Blighted Blood, I *know* it is Dior Lachance. But none there are to answer how, save Mother Maryn. And to hear her speak…'

"Phoebe stalked toward me then, her voice iron.

"'I've fought beside ye, Gabriel de León. Hip-deep in blood and slaughter. Leeches butchered my people. Raped my homeland. Returned the husband I thought slain, only to slay him again afore my eyes. Know ye better than *any,* how bright the hate in me burns fer the Dead. So ye know how hard it must be fer me to confess this now.'

"Phoebe shook her head then, shrugging.

"'But I believe them. I truly do. Celene and Maryn fight to end this endless night. From reddest blood comes bluest sky. They do what is right. I *know* it, Gabe.'

"She knelt before me, hands on my knees, eyes fixed on mine.

"'We *must* take Ashdrinker to Dior.'

"'Why did Voss abandon his attack?'

"All eyes turned to Aaron. He stood in the shadows as ever; as far from all that burning ink as he could be. But light still shone on the ice-blue arc of his eyes as he spoke again.

"'If what you say is true, mademoiselle, Augustin was almost his. Why pull back?'

"'Who can know the mind of a madman?'

"'Ever he's wanted Dior alive,' Baptiste offered. 'Perhaps seeing her duskdance changed something? Perhaps he thought she might be hurt in the fighting?'

"'Or perhaps the appearance of this Maryn changed his game,' Aaron murmured.

"'Mebbe,' Phoebe said. 'The Esana have fought to defend the Redeemer's holy line for centuries. And Mother Maryn told us that Voss is a worshipper of the Fallen.'

"The mood around the tent fell through the floor at that, Charlotte signing the wheel, my own belly gone chill.

"'Aye,' Phoebe said, gazing about the gathering. 'The Five who slew yer Redeemer. The Five *cursed* with his blood. Lickspittles to the Lord of the Abyss, all of them. Who can fathom the motives of monsters who swear allegiance to the King of Hell himself?'

"I stared hard at Phoebe then. I could see she spoke truth; that whatever she'd witnessed on that long road to Augustin had somehow given her faith in the Faithless. After all she'd seen and done, that *had* to count for something.

"'We can ask Maryn ourselves,' I declared. 'When we get to Augustin.'

"Phoebe grinned, rising to her feet triumphant.

"'We can set off amorrow. Be back in the capital b—'

"'No, Phoebe. Tomorrow we attack San Maximille.'

"'… Why?'

"'*Why*.'

"I shook my head, bewildered she'd even asked.

"'Because the Endless Legion has turned my country into a wasteland. Because the monsters up in that château have brought this empire to its knees. Because the Voss see us as cattle, fit for naught but slaughter, and God only knows how many innocent men, women, and *children* go to their deaths up in that sty tonight to feed those fucking pigs.'

"I rose to my feet then, hands curled into fists.

"'Because Fabién Voss and his brood have murdered *millions*. My own bride and eleven-year-old daughter among them. It's been two years since he took them from me. Not a day goes by I don't live that night again in my head. They laughed, Phoebe. They *laughed* as my angels died, and I swore I'd see them dead for it. Every. *Single*. One. We've marched for months to be here. Never have I stood so close to the vengeance I vowed. So while I appreciate the eagerness of a creature who's waited eight hundred years for this moment, your Mother Maryn might just have to wait a few days more.'

"I clenched my jaw, hissing through my fangs.

"'Because *I* have a king to kill.'

"'We.'

"I glanced to Aaron as he spoke, the ghost of a smile on his bloodless lips.

"'*We* have a king to kill.'

"'Aye.' Lachlan met my eyes, despite the soft ire between us. '*We*.'

"Phoebe shook her head. 'If ye fall in battle against Voss, the sainted blade will be *lost,* Gabriel. And so too the hope of this world.'

"I smiled then, small and sad.

"'I remember nights when you had more faith in me, Mlle á Dúnnsair.'

"I turned to my cousin, my brethren, nodding to each in turn.

"'Get some sleep, all of you. We attack come the dawn.'

"And turning on my silvered heel, I strode from the tent.

"I tasted the night outside, the witching hour creeping closer, frail sunrise still hours away. I could hear talk of sleepless men among the tents, the desperate prayers of others, that long night of the soul stretching ahead of each. I'd lost count of how many eves before battle I'd spent, restless or drunk or simply sitting in silent terror. But though I remembered what it was to be afraid of death, walking back to my bed that night, thirst spreading like venom through my veins, in truth I couldn't have told you if I feared or welcomed the thought of dying anymore.

"Vengeance or annihilation came with the sun. Either way, an ending. But as I stepped into the quiet dark of my tent, two words echoed within me still.

"*Dior lives*.

"'Gabe.'

"I turned to find Phoebe behind me, framed against torchlight and falling snow, that song of scars scribed over her skin. I could see anger in her golden eyes. But past the heartache and frustration, I also saw regret at her words. The knowledge she'd hurt me.

"'I'm sorry. I dinnae mean that. I *do* hold faith in ye.'

"'If you didn't, you'd not be a fool. I know what we face amorrow, Phoebe.'

"'Then why face it?' she hissed, stepping inside. 'Dior waits in Augustin, Gabe. I know the love ye bear her, and she for ye. Why risk that, especially now? We can end it *all*.'

"I looked to Mama's bloodstained journal upon my desk.

"'Because I don't trust the Esani, Phoebe.'

"I turned my eyes to the sky, whispering the heart of the matter.

"'And because I made a promise.'

"'Gabe—'

"'Do you remember what you told me in Ravenspire? How if we're blessed, we might find those few who in their own broken way…'

"'Make our broken edge complete. I remember.'

"'I was whole with them. Astrid. Patience. If never before or since. The devil up on that hill *took* them from me, Phoebe. And for that, he will die. I swear to whatever God still listens, I will *smile* as that blackhearted fucking bastard dies.'

"Her gaze drifted, as if she still searched for a way to steer me clear. 'Gabe—'

"'If Lilidh were here right now, if the monstress who took your husband from you was within your grasp, could you walk away?'

"Phoebe hung her head.

"'Nae. I couldn't.'

"She looked out into the night then, southward toward Dior, then up to that broken tumble of snow-clad stone, the grim château perched upon it. And though I could feel her weariness, her fear, still I saw her jaw clench.

"'I'll nae walk away now, neither.'

"'Phoebe…'

"'I told ye once I am nae green maid to swear troth to a man I barely know. And to that, I hold.' She met my eyes, searching for some answer she'd never been able to find. 'I fear I'm still nae the one to unbreak ye, Gabriel de León. I know nae if any woman could. But I swear, by Mountains and sweet Mothermoons, though ye be one of the most foolhardy, shite-witted, pigheaded pricks I've ever met…'

"I laughed then, and she in kind, fire twinkling in her gaze. But though her laugh faded, the fire remained, burning in that alloy of platinum and gold.

"'Yer also one o' the finest men I've ever known. If the world's fate rests on this battle amorrow, I'd nae be counted among those who shirked its shores. But even if ye faced that devil wi' naught at risk but yer life, I'd never leave ye to stand against him alone.'

"She pressed one hand to my cheek, tracing the teardrop scars Dior had left me with the edge of one talon. And though my vow to the ground still echoed in the halls of my heart, though this woman might never mend me, still I recalled how good it had felt to just hold her in my arms. I felt warmer for her closeness, and colder at the thought of our parting, and if I faced my death amorrow, I vowed at least I'd live tonight.

"'I stand with ye, Gabe. If ye'll have m—'

"My hands slipped about her waist, pulling her into my chest and silencing her with a kiss. Fierce and swift and hot, she kissed me back, mouth open, surging against me like the tide before drawing back, back into the shallows. She searched my eyes; smoldering, wondering, daring not to breathe. But desire won her over, that blissful, hungry *wanting* swelling in us now, striking spark into our tinder and setting both aflame.

"She threw her arms about my shoulders as her mouth again found mine, clawing her way up my body and cinching her thighs about my waist so tight I gasped. Eyes closed in the warmth of her kiss, I could only stagger, finally tumbling atop her on my bed. We laughed, but our smiles died swift as that heat surged again, her hand slipping into my leathers as she wrapped her legs around me, talons raking over my arse.

"She rolled me onto my back, atop me as we kissed now, riding, writhing. Tearing the ties of my shirt, she dragged it over my head before reaching to her own tunic and stripping herself bare. Careful of the silver on my skin, I ran my touch over her body, drinking in the sight of her above me—hard curves and inkwork spirals and soft, bee-stung lips. She took hold of my right hand to avoid the sevenstar on my left, pressing both together and raising them above my head, holding me pinned. She kissed me again, tasting, teasing, letting herself lean forward *just* enough that the pebble-hard swells of her nipples brushed the silvered ink on my chest.

"Rearing back a breath, she bit my lip, hissing in pleasurepain as she let her breasts brush against me again, slow and torturous. Her hips moved, grinding hard against me as she breathed a command into my open mouth.

"'Don't move.'

"I did as she bid, hands yet above my head as she descended. Long braids of wildfire hair caressing my skin, soft kisses cascading down my chest, every inch of skin not silvered, adored. Her talons found the buckle of my swordbelt, flinging it and my scabbard aside. Next went the ties on my leathers, dragged down to my knees and then clear. Kicking off her own britches, she knelt naked astride me, silhouetted against ember light; a beauty of thorn and bramble, blood and scars. Her eyes roamed my body, claws running down my raised arms, my heaving chest, over the hills and valleys of muscle at my belly, down, ever down. I gasped as her touch reached my cock, skimming the smooth, hard heat of me, groaning as she took me in both hands and *squeezed*. Eyes locked on mine, she tossed her hair back over her shoulders, and with a wicked smile, descended toward her sin.

"*'Oh, God…'*

"Her tongue had me shivering, her lips had me shaking, her heat had me groaning, spine arching, head thrown back and struggling to breathe. I tell you, that woman *devoured* me then, ravenous, covetous, swallowing me whole. Her hunger seemed endless, her pace relentless, and though I'd have lived in that bliss forever, I couldn't long stand it. Trying to hold on, teeth gritted as she sucked me, hissing in warning, 'God, Phoebe, if you don't…'

"'I want it,' she whispered. 'Let me *taste* you.'

"Soft lips brushed against me, burning on my skin.

"'Then you taste me.'

"Her tongue ran up my length, languid, sweet, eyes drowning in mine.

"'*All* of me.'

"The thought was too much to bear, the memory of her blood flooding across my tongue one step too far. Back into her mouth and over my edge, I plunged, white flame in my head, flooding into her mouth, lips peeling back from my fangs as she ended me. Phoebe moaned, swallowing all I gave her then sighing, pleading, more, *more*. My whole body shook as she suckled, teeth gritted against that blissful agony until I could bear it no longer, forced at the last to beg mercy. She laughed then, scattering a waterfall of soft kisses over my cock. And wordlessly she ascended, climbing up my body and straddling my face.

"'Your turn.'

"I groaned, diving into that heaven, as hungry for her as she for me. She was rust and honey and salt, already wet and warm as summer rain, soft and smooth beneath my tongue. Eyes closed against the sight of her, naught but the taste of her, God, the scent of her, the *heat* of her, washing me over and drenching me through. Phoebe swayed like a sapling in my storm, reaching for my hands yet above my head. I tried to draw away, no wish to bring her pain until I realized *that* was her want now, pressing one silvered hand to her heaving breast, the other to her hip.

"'Hurt me,' she breathed.

"She hissed as silver scorched her skin, reaching behind my head to draw me in.

"'Bite me.'

"My belly rolled at those words—two little words—bringing my whole world to its knees. That beast in me rising triumphant, the memory of sightless eyes and bloody sheets in León surfacing briefly, drowned by that monster's defeating roar.

"'*Bite* me, Gabriel.'

"Darkest delight at that command, no part of me not now its slave. The thirst reared up within, a wave so high it blotted all light, my sky dashed crimson. And turning my head, lips and tongue brushing against that wondrous divot at join of quim and thigh, I peeled back my lips and sank my fangs deep inside her.

"Blood. *Blood.* So simple a word for so beautiful and terrible a thing. So divine a cup to live for. So bleak a poison to die for. Into my mouth she *flooded,* rust and honey washed away beneath that wondrous red, *red,* the power of the Moonsthrone flooding my veins, through my thrashing heart, out to every humming finger's tip. Phoebe flung back her head, flaming tresses spilling down her back as she shattered, unmoored, un*made,* and I had to seize hold her hips and pin her still as the stars collided in her skies.

"Still I drank, and still she'd not finished; her little deaths endless, dying again and again with every swallow. Tremors ran her length, arching spine and bucking hips and curling toes. But true death beckoned, that pleasure too deep for mortals long to bear, and finally she tore loose, tumbling, my lips, her thighs, the sheets all spattered red.

"God, so *red.*

"We lay breathless, gasping, side by side in that perfume. Phoebe was still shaking, sheened in freshest sweat. I lay drenched in her blood; the magik of earth corrupted that had smashed the walls of Maergenn like glass. My thirst was dimmed but nowhere *near* sated, that monster reaching out through the bars. The man and beast in me, so oft and long at war were one now, Phoebe rolling toward me, breathing around our bloody kiss.

"*'More.'*

"I groaned, thrilling head to toe at the thought.

"'Turn around.'

"She obeyed at once, rolling up onto all fours. Her body was poetry, sacred ink spiraling over perfect curves, her skin white as milk, scarred and spattered red. I drank in the sight of her, running rough hands over her goosebumps. Phoebe's breath quickened as I rose up behind her, a predator kneeling now at her back, my shadow swallowing her whole. She gazed at me over her shoulder, reaching back, petals parted between her fingertips.

"'Fuck me slow. But fuck me *now.*'

"My head was spinning, butterflies raging in my belly. My fangs had grown long in my gums, my cock so hard it *ached,* circling once, twice over her honeyed lips. I held myself poised, watching her tremble, her moan caught in her lungs. Ten long beats of her heart I teased her, every one sweetest torture. But at last, I succumbed, sliding home, her talons sinking into the bed, eyes rolling back in her head, so overcome she could barely speak. My hand came down on her buttock, the sharp *crack* of skin on skin breaking the silence between us. Phoebe gasped and arched her spine, throwing back her head.

"'Ohhhh, Moons, that's it. *Take* me, lover.'

"I grasped her hip, feeling her slow surrender, sinking deep and deeper still. Phoebe was sheened with sweat, melting, moaning as my hand quested between her thighs. I moved as she'd bid me, sinking a little deeper with each thrust, fingers brushing soft against her quim, circling as she trembled like a leaf at autumn's end.

"'Faster,' she begged. 'Goddess, *harder*.'

"I smacked her again, smiling as she gasped. My hand slipped into her hair, closing into a fist, pulling her back farther onto me, silken heat now swallowing me utterly. Our bodies were driftwood in flood, tangling to the hymn of her heartbeat. Her moans came louder, back bowed and eyes closed and feet rising off the bed.

"'Ohhh *Moons…'*

"Fist knotted in her slayerbraids, I dragged her up toward me, my lioness growling, hissing, grinding back against me. Our fingers were entwined now, writing sonnets between her thighs. Her head was thrown back, fire-bright tresses spilling in waves between us, wrapping her talons in my hair as her lashes fluttered on her cheeks.

"'Give it to me,' she begged. 'I *need* it.'

"I growled, hot against her skin. 'Tell me what you want.'

"'Bite me. Fuck me. *Own* me.'

"Her hair was soaked with sweat as I brushed it back from her neck. Nothing inside me save want as I dipped my teeth toward her surrender. I moved my hips, slipping slow from her molten heat, leaving her groaning and aching and empty. Ivory needles brushed against her pulse, that eternal moment before our fall stretching out before us. Her breath gone ragged, her whole body perfectly stilled, my cock poised at her quim and fangs pressed light on her skin, damnation and salvation awaiting.

"*'Please.'*

"'Groaning, biting, I sank twice inside her, her scream lost beneath the thunder of her heart. Phoebe was adrift in the Kiss, I in the bliss of her blood, my mouth too full of roiling, burning *life* to cry out as I ended. Instead I swallowed, hilt-deep inside her, both of us entwined so deep we were one, I swear, *one* in that dark communion. I've no notion how long it lasted, the pair of us swaying, swallowing, nothing and no one between us. But that monster behind my eyes was still unsated, bidding me drink, just one more mouthful, just one drop, don't stop, never *STOP*.

"*'Stop.'*

"My whisper was hoarse, spools of gore dripping from my chin. But I drew back, somehow still its master, sliding from her inferno and crashing on the bed.

"'Sweet fucking Mothermaid,' I gasped.

"Phoebe collapsed; not wilting to the furs but *crumbling*. She lay motionless so long, so quiet, I reached out, brushing one sweat-slick braid back from her blushing cheek.

"'You aright?'

"'… N-nae.'

"I frowned then, levering myself up on one elbow, afeared I'd truly hurt her. Phoebe's face was mashed into the mattress, but I saw her eyes sparkling.

"'Ye have *ruined* me for every man hereafter, Silverboy.'

"'The pleasure was all mine, Kitcat.'

"My chuckle faded as I gazed at her, bloodied and bare and beautiful, my heart swelling at the sight. Hypnotized, I ran a gentle thumb over the inkwork on her skin.

"'I would that there weren't. Men for you hereafter, I mean. I would that things were different, Phoebe. For us and all this world.'

"She took my hand and kissed it, careful now of the silver.

"'Fret on that after amorrow. Right now, my chances of livin' through the battle are less than slim. I'll barely be able to *walk* come the dawn, let alone fight.'

"I laughed again, and she laughed in kind, dragging herself upward and pressing warm lips to mine. I sighed at the taste of her, the feel of her, our kiss deepening as I surged against her as best I could without scorching her to cinders. Phoebe's tongue flickered against mine, talons skimming light over my skin, down, down. But she caught her breath as her hand reached my nethers, stirring at once to her touch.

"'Mothermoons … again? *Already?*'

"I shrugged, my smile gone wicked. 'Duskdancer blood.'

"She purred, squeezing me soft. 'Yer tempting as all nine sins. But if I'm to be good fer *anything* save dying at dawn, we'd best get to sleep.'

"'Sleep.'

"Dragging a hand down my face, I sighed again. My body was flush with the heat of Phoebe's blood, every vein hammering with the strength of ancient mountains. I could feel that blightborn magik within me, just as I'd felt in the firestorm of Maergenn, rolling onto my back and staring at the hidden heavens beyond.

"'I fear I'll not sleep tonight. Not now.'

"'Well, *I* must.' Phoebe was still lazily stroking my cock, now rock-hard and aching in her hand. 'So get this beautiful beast out of my sight afore I succumb to want and fuck ye all night. Because if I do, we're *dead* amorrow.'

"'Stop playing with it, then.'

"'Mmn, but I *like* playing with it.'

"She leaned down, licking me slow from root to swollen crown. I smacked her arse and she laughed, losing her grip to slap me back. I kissed her again, brief and sweet; her cheeks and both eyelids, lashes fluttering beneath my lips. And though it felt like covering up the sun, I dragged the furs up over her naked body, leaving her at last to rest.

“Hauling on my leathers and tunic, I searched the dark for wherever she’d hurled my boots. I couldn’t find one, nor my belt neither, finally abandoning the quest as Phoebe lifted her head and actually *snarled* at me to let her sleep.

“I smiled at the sight of her, lifting one hand and blowing her a kiss.

“Reaching up to catch it, she mashed her face back into the furs.

“And with a last glance to the bloodied beauty in my bed, I stepped into the dark.”

VII

EVERY DAY AND NOT ENOUGH

“SEVEN MARTYRS, THE night was *stunning,* coldblood. Glittering crystals tumbling from the endless black overhead. Wind singing a song as old as time across hills that had stood here long before any man or beast had drawn breath. The stillness of it, the vastness of it had me wondering, *smiling* as I looked across those snow-clad plains, that ribbon of frozen river, the sea of tents around me and the ocean of darkness above.

“My senses were aflame, Phoebe’s blighted blood crashing, *seething* within me, and in that moment, there was naught I thought impossible. I walked among the soldiers, gathered about small fires, sitting alone with their worries. I spoke with them, talking and joking, telling them there was no shame in fear. They were young men. Good men. And I was proud to fight beside them, no matter if many were afraid. For who is it that ever answers the call of war despite their fears? Who ever keeps the monsters from the door?

“Men like them.

“In the end, I stalked to the camp’s edge, staring at San Maximille above. Grim walls encircled the hillside city, taller walls of the château looming on the slopes beyond. San Maximille had been a *mountain* yestereve; a throne of razored stone and the château an emperor sat upon it. But now, with that blood in my veins and the knowledge Dior was alive, the mountain seemed an anthill, and vengeance not so far away.

“‘You cannot sleep either?’

“Turning, I found my cousin behind me, alone in the chill. Cold wind blew long black locks about her face, hands tucked in her sleeves, her eye fixed on the château above.

“I smiled at the sight of her. ‘Not much chance of that, I fear.’

“‘No you don’t.’

“I blinked, head tilted in silent question.

“‘You don’t fear anything, Gabriel.’

“I laughed, mirthless, head thrown back and shoulders shaking.

“‘Hear me now, Charlotte de León. I’ve stood on the eve of a hundred battles, and I’ve been afraid before every one. When the screaming starts, believe me when I say, the soldier you want beside you *least* is the one who’s fearless. Because that’s a soldier with naught to lose.’ I shook my head, sighing. ‘I fear more than most will ever know, cousin.’

“‘You hide it well.’

“I looked at her then, lips pursed. ‘You too.’

“‘I think you’d have made a good baron.’

“‘You’ll make a better one.’

“‘Will you pray with me, cousin?’

“‘… No.’

“She smiled sadly at that. Charlotte’s hand was pressed to the circle of rowan wood about her throat—she’d left the sigil of the Angel of Fire behind in León, taking up the Redeemer’s wheel instead. And while perhaps the heat was less blinding than once I’d seen, I still saw in her the fire of a furious belief. I shook my head at that.

“‘I wonder how you’ve any desire but to curse the Almighty, cousin. Surprised you’ve any faith left in you at all after being so long held in evil’s thrall.’

“‘I’m surprised you can doubt it.’

“‘It was God who let you languish in that vampire’s clutches.’

“‘And it was God who delivered me in the end.’ Charlotte looked me over, smile warming. ‘You’re surprised I can still love him in the face of my suffering. I’m surprised you cannot, given it was through *you* that suffering was ended. You are his hand, Gabriel, though you see it not. He works his will through you, and all folk like you.’

“I sighed at that. I wasn’t in the mood to argue; I’d heard all of it before. And if that wheel gave her comfort in this dark before the dawn, who was I to tell her to cast it aside? But the thought of what awaited us amorrow still hung upon my shoulders, and that fear swelled still. Not for me. But for all I had to lose.

“‘You want some advice, Charlotte?’

“She smiled. ‘A good baronne always listens to wise counsel, Chevalier.’

“‘Then as your counselor, I’d tell you not to waste what might be the last night of your life praying to he who knows your heart anyway. You’ll have plenty of time to talk to God in the end. And who knows when that end comes.’ I nodded to a peak among the canvas sea. ‘Lachlan’s tent lies distant, and he within. Go to him, cousin.’

“Her smile vanished, a cold dawn come upon her face.

“‘He is sworn to God. I’ll not make him an oathbreaker.’

“‘I’d not counsel you to. Or not to, if such is your want. But at least *tell* him how you feel, Charlotte. Look into his eyes and let him know before tonight is over. I know not what sunrise brings, but I know the weight of words unsaid. How soon the chance to speak them can be taken from us, along with the ones we should’ve spoken them to.’

“She hung her head, tucking a stray lock behind her ear.

“‘Are there words you wished you’d spoken? To your wife and daughter?’

“‘I told them I loved them every single day. And *still* not enough.’

“She looked to the horizon, drew a shaking breath.

“‘I thank you for your counsel.’

“I put a hand to my heart and bowed. ‘Baronne.’

“She smiled, voice gone tight. ‘Chevalier.’

“Charlotte walked away then. And though I’d no wish to pry, I noted she headed in the direction of Lachie’s tent, at least. My eyes returned to the château, my smile dimming. The blood within me was pounding, roiling, that strength *longing* to be unleashed.

“Reaching up, I found that vial yet strung about my throat, warm against my skin. A weapon to kill the unkillable. I’d thought it Dior’s last gift to me, that nothing would remain of her in this aftermath. But there in the shadow of those dark hills, the notion I might see her again when this battle was done gave me just one more reason to fight.

“One more reason to *win.*

“Eyes on the walls above, I hissed my hatred.

“My purpose.

“My prayer.

“*‘Fabién.’*

“And then … I felt him.”

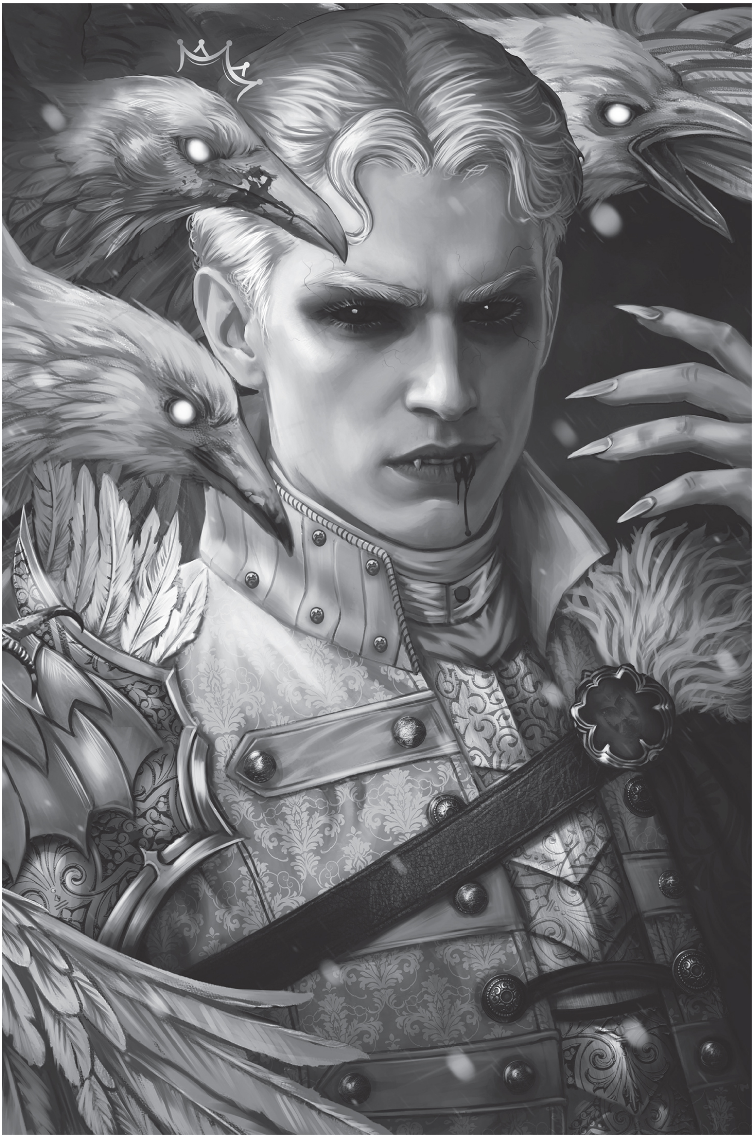
The Last Silversaint swallowed the final gulp of his goblet, reaching to the bottle. And as he poured, Jean-François could not help but notice his hands were shaking.

“I’d felt it once before. The Battle of the Twins. As those corpses swarmed over the mountain and I stood in their path with Aaron and Baptiste. The kiss of serpent’s fangs to my skin. The dust on tombs of forgotten kings. There in that cold night, I again felt the weight of a presence impossible, a mind unknowable, pressing on mine from far-flung battlements above.

“The mind of a Forever King.

“*I see thee.*

“‘Great Redeemer…’ I whispered.



"I beheld him then, as if he stood before me, just as he'd done the night he knocked upon our door. His skin and hair bleached snow-pale by years beyond counting and sins past reckoning. A youth, fey and eternal, beautiful and terrible, wreathed in an unlight cold and bitterbleak. I heard him speak in my head then, across the grey snows between us, and the sound of his voice seemed a song to unmake the world.

"*How fare, old friend?*

"'Fabién…'

“He smiled, cold as a lifetime unloved.

“*So proud of thee, I am, Gabriel. So* much *thou hast become since last mine eyes beheld thy splendor. Well served, I name thee, to have shed shackles of hearth and home. No more the family man. No longer lion playing lamb.*

“His smile faded, head tilted.

“*But thou hast journeyed far for naught, old friend. Forever endeth not with the dawn. And I will not die, by man of woman born.*

“‘I’m no man, bastard. I’m a *lion.*’

“*Aye. The lion* I *made thee.*

“My fists clenched at that, the shadows of my wife and baby rising at my back. Voss could sense them too, thoughts now uncoiling within mine. But with that blood inside me, that power of mountains old and moons blood-red, I slammed shut the door to those memories, forcing him back out into the cold between us.

“He blinked, ebon eyes glittering with an awful … *fondness.*

“*Look at what thou art become. Centuries have I sought an adversary worthy of me. A man who could give me but a moment in which I could again taste life through fear. What solace, what* justice, *to know in the end, he was of mine own hand’s making. Though dear Wulfric bedded thy sweet mama, more thy father* I *than* he *shall ever be.*

“Fabién tilted his head, gaze gone sly.

“*But thou shalt slay me not, Gabriel. I know it.*

“‘We’ll see. You’re weak. Two of your daughters are dead by these hands already.’

“*Aye. Only four of eight remain now. My children thou hast continued to murder, though all too well ye know the pain of a father’s grief. To hell thou hast consigned my son and daughters, Silversaint. Their suff’ring wrought eternal at the throne of the Fallen. Yet how can I be wroth with thee? Who hath given me my greatest gift?*

“‘I’ve another for you amorrow,’ I hissed. ‘One I wager you’ll enjoy less. You wanted an enemy? You wanted a fear? Well, now you fucking have him, Voss. You *should* be afraid. And if you’ve a will to whine about the eternal suffering of your brood, you can take it up with your unholy master when I deliver you to his side.’

“Fabién’s smile faded then, malevolence welling in his eyes.

“*Told thee, did she? Thy thieving sister? Know ye not, what the Faithless are?*

“‘I know what *you* are, Voss. And I know who you *serve.*’

“I shook my head then, almost disappointed.

“‘You know, I used to think you were the devil himself, Fabién.’ I spat on the snow between us. ‘Turns out you’re just his fucking errand boy.’

“That smile returned, smaller and somehow sad.

“*Come to me then. The cost shall be writ red, but I wish to witness as thine eyes behold the glory. The horror. The lie the Esani hath spun thee. I told thee once,* *with* truest *evil hast thou made thy bed. But come the bloody dawn, I shall* teach *thee.*

“He left then, image fading between us, only his whisper remaining.

“*Come, my son not mine. Thy famille awaits.*

“I stood in the dark thereafter, cold and stilled. The fire within me was undimmed, but in truth, I was still shaken. Fabién had told me before that the Esani were an evil unmeasured. My trust of Celene and Maryn already hung by a thread after reading Mama’s journal. And though I knew nothing Fabién told me could be believed, there in the shadow of San Maximille, I wondered if the same wasn’t true of the Faithless.

“Or those who spoke for them.

“And turning, my eyes drifted toward my tent.

“That bloodied beauty in my bed.

“I started walking, snow crunching under bare feet, britches riding low for want of my belt. But soon I was running, *flying* past the campfires, the rising soldiers, dawn’s dim promise not yet kissing the horizon. And flinging myself through the flaps of my tent, I found no bloodied beauty waiting, my heart dropping as I saw my bed was empty.”

“Empty?”

Jean-François looked up from his tome, chocolat eyes alight.

“What do you mean *empty*?”

“I mean Phoebe was gone, vampire.”

The Last Silversaint hung his head.

“And she’d taken Ashdrinker with her.”

VIII

ONE LAST DAY AS A LION

"'HEATHEN FUCKIN' *BITCH*!'

"Lachlan slammed his fist upon the map table, stone pieces shuddering. With another vicious curse he took hold its edge and flipped it, sending the whole rig spinning, tumbling, *crashing* to the ground. Carlos and Tolman shared a troubled glance; Charlotte raised one thin brow, pursing her lips as Lachie sank into a crouch among the wreckage.

"'How could she…' His eyes found mine, gleaming, broken-bottle green. 'How the *hell* could ye let her bend us over like that, ye dozy, cunt-struck fuckweasel?'

"Aaron was stood in the corner, studying his fingernails.

"'I confess I've never encountered a penis that gets its owner into *quite* as much hot water as yours.' He glanced up at me. 'I hope it was a grand romp? I'd hate to think we'd thrown away our one true chance of slaying the Forever King for a humdrum shag.'

"'This is nae fuckin' joke, de Coste!'

"'Do you hear me laughing, á Craeg?'

"'What in the *Almighty's* name do we do now?' Charlotte hissed.

"Valentino brushed aside the flap and stepped into the tent, his peregrine on his shoulder. Dawn had not yet broken outside, and he was bleary-eyed from being woken early, still remembering to tip his hat and wink at my cousin.

"I rose to my feet, stomach in my throat. 'Any sign?'

"'Her tracks lead south. She stole a string of ponies, so they're easy enough to spot, even in this gloom. But she made it to a stretch of deadwood, and Eirene lost sight of her.'

"Baptiste rested against one of the tent poles, arms folded, watching me with muted dismay. 'Doesn't take a falcon to know where she's headed, Gabriel.'

"'Augustin,' I sighed.

"'She's got three hours' lead, at most,' Aaron said. 'And she's on ordinary horses. I can take Eclipse, ride her down swift, and deal with her swifter.'

"'If you don't find her by sunset, she'll dance to her wealdshape. And then she's a *ghost* in those bloody woods.' I shook my head, jaw clenched. 'And we can't afford to lose you, Aaron. Especially now. I need you with me in the slopway.'

"Charlotte's eyes narrowed. 'You still mean to *attack*?'

"'Goddamn right I do. Fabién Voss dies today.'

"'And how the *fuck* d'ye plan to kill him?' Lachlan demanded. 'She took Ashdrinker!'

"The gifts of the Esani still flow in these veins, brother. And now, so does the power of the Moonsthrone.' I picked up a stone soldier fallen from the table, crushing it to finest powder in one fist. 'Anointed with Dior's blood, a silversteel blade to his blackened fucking heart will still end Fabién. Especially after I've boiled the blood from his veins. But this power in me won't long last. If we've a hope to end him, it *must* be today.'

"My fellows looked among each other, uneasy.

"'I'll command none to ride with me,' I said. 'If you've lost faith in this cause, I'll go on as I started. Alone.'

"Lachlan chewed his lip, dragging silver knuckles across his brow. I could see the rage in him, the disappointment. But still he heaved a sigh, rising slow to his feet.

"'Never alone. Yer back, my blade, remember?'

"Aaron nodded. 'I stand with you, brother. Always.'

"'We.' Baptiste stepped up beside his husband. '*We* stand with you.'

"Charlotte looked to her second, Mathieu. The grizzled lieutenant stared back at his dame, unblinking. His brow was still scribed with ashes, his trust in her undimmed.

"'The men will go where you bid, Lionne Cendrée.'

"My cousin looked to Lachlan then, lips pursed. My old 'prentice met her eye, and though I knew not what had been said or done, *something* had shifted between them. I could see how easily she might be swayed by a gentle word, but Lachie didn't push, didn't press. Knowing this must be the decision of the Baronne of León alone.

"Charlotte turned to her second, chin held high.

"'Muster the men. Today, we take back this empire.'

“Mathieu smiled, thumping one fist against his breastplate. With a nod to me, he marched from the tent, already shouting orders to his aides-de-camp. I heard soldiers rising, leather creaking, steel singing, my every sense still sharper than a thousand knives. Valentino grunted, stepping to my side. And reaching to the beaten scabbards on his belt, he drew one of his beautiful swords.

“‘These were wrought by Forgemaster Argyle, God rest him. *Honor* and *Valor* I named them. Twins, like me and my brother, not made to be parted. But for the glory of being the blade that ends Fabién Voss, I’ll sunder them for today. If you vow to unite them again come the dusk.’

“He handed me one of the blades, gleaming silver in the brazier light. The pommel was decorated with a sevenstar, the crossguard set with the figure of Sanael, Angel of Blood, chalices in his outstretched hands. The silver patterns in the steel were like whorls in finest timber, and down the blade’s length was a quote from the Book of Vows:

“*Fear is but the cradle of valor.*

“‘I swear it.’ I grasped his arm and squeezed. ‘Merci, brother.’

“Valentino tipped his tricorn to Charlotte. ‘See you in the château, mademoiselle.’

“With a wink to Lachlan, Valentino stalked from the tent. Carlos shook my hand and wished me Angel Fortuna’s grace before following his twin into the cold. I’ve said there’s a strange fellowship forged in combat, coldblood. A brotherhood no one who hasn’t bled beside another man can understand. And though a life of war is no man’s true desire, I was grateful that at least in mine, I’d had the fortune to know fellowship like theirs.

“Tolman the Scarred rumbled to a halt in front of me, looking me up and down. Though we’d journeyed months together, fought beside each other, never once had I heard him say a word. He regarded me mutely, piggy eyes set in a face knotted with scars, and I wondered if this was the moment he might offer some hidden wisdom—his silence held so long as he had no meaningful word to speak.

“‘Twat,’ he growled.

“And out from the tent he stalked.

“Baptiste chuckled, and even Aaron found a smile. Lachie was gathering his gear, checking his pistols, and quiet as a whisper, Charlotte drifted to his side. Not a word passed between them; only the simplest of touches to Lachlan’s shoulder, the gentlest reply of his fingertips against hers. It lasted but a moment, fragile as porcelain. But as Charlotte marched from the tent, Lachlan behind her, my old ’prentice and I shared a glance, and the smile on his lips told me all I needed to know.

“As I checked my gear, loaded my wheellock, I saw Aaron take up Baptiste’s hand. Looking into his husband’s eyes, Aaron’s own were rimmed with bloody tears.

"'I go with Gabriel now. But I'll vow to return … if you'll be waiting for me.'

"'Always,' Baptiste declared.

"'With the reserves, Baptiste. At the back of the line.'

"The blackthumb hung his head, his husband leaning forward to catch his eye.

"'Forever is nothing without you. Promise me, love.'

"The big man glanced to me, shoulders slumping.

"'I promise.'

"Aaron kissed Baptiste's lips, some small measure of their old warmth returned. And together, we stepped into the chill. The winds were sweeping down from the hills, that dark before dawn piercing each man's soul. Soldiers were forming up; infantry with blades and shields, engineers with troop ladders and cable, rows of archers armed with those magnificent mechwork bows. Cortez and his 'prentices were checking the workings, the forgemaster nodding once to me. And though the dark was near bottomless, the foe ahead deathless, my heart was lifted up to see them; twenty thousand of my countrymen, standing tall despite their fear, set to burn this horror from the earth.

"We stood before our legion in the tumbling snows, silversaints clad in black leathers, I in my silver-heeled boots and the greatcoat I'd stolen from that dead brother in Maergenn. I touched the blade at my waist, Phoebe's blood still filling my veins with fire. I felt the power, the strength, the faith of these brothers around me. But more, most, reaching to that vial about my throat, warmed by the beat of my own heart…"

The Last Silversaint smiled then.

"I felt *ready*.

"'Soldiers of León! Hear me now!'

"The troops fell silent, the winds seemed to still as Charlotte raised her voice. She was sat upon a fine grey gelding from our grandfather's stables, trotting down the line. The wind blew her hair back from her face, those burns she'd earned defending the city of their birth. One eye was covered by her patch, but her other blazed with the faith and fury of a hundred suns, meeting each man's gaze and filling them with the same.

"'By heaven's horn are we here assembled! The might of God is on our side this day! The Testaments tell all on earth below and hea'en above is the work of his hand! And all the work of his hand in accord with his plan! Then so too *this* his will!'

"'Véris!' came the cry, fists pounding on chests. 'Véris!'

"'We are the sons and daughters of León! The monsters we face have bled our homeland dry, and I say they are owed a bleeding in kind! One day as a lion is worth ten thousand as a lamb, mes amis, mes frères, mes sœurs tous! And if this be the day I die, I vow I will make it a day to be remembered!'

“Charlotte drew her mechwork blade high into the air, the song of steel bright in the rising dawn. Flames were etched down its length, gleaming in the eyes of every man who looked upon her. And her voice was a song in every heart.

“‘Long live House de León!’

“*‘De León! La Lionne Cendrée! ’*

“Lachlan drew his silversteel, roaring over the wind. ‘For San Michon!’

“The silversaints roared in kind, a bellow of challenge ringing across the snow-struck valley, upon those fangs of stone. On the mont above, Château San Maximille crouched like a carrion bird awaiting the feast. But the blood in me was singing, vow and vengeance calling, and raising Valor high, I roared at the walls above.

“*‘One last day as a lion! ’*

“And toward battle, victory, an ending, we charged.”

IX

A SAINT GODLESS

“SNOW CHURNING, WIND biting, hearts pounding, we rode. Aaron on Eclipse, me on Argent, thundering dauntless beneath me. Dawn’s feeble light was bleeding across eastern skies, but no warmth followed in its wake. If anything, as our troops marched over the bridge toward the city of San Maximille, the chill only seemed to deepen.”

The Last Silversaint breathed deep, stroking the stubble on his chin.

“I didn’t see the battle in the city streets. I know only what I was told afterward. The city around the château was designed to be easily defensible, but it seemed abandoned at first. No troops manned the outer walls, and the gates were soon split apart by Lachie’s and Tolman’s blows. The streets beyond were a tangle, sloping and twisting seemingly at random; all the better to foil bow and wheellock fire. There was no straight path up to the château walls, just a maze of crooked doglegs and wending stairs. And into that warren the army of León marched, infantry afront, archers arear, silversaints among their number.

“The ambush was a clever one, but not *quite* clever enough. Voss waited until our troops were enmeshed in the streets before striking. Wretched lay in wait; hundreds hidden in basements and attics, under floorboards and in gutters, held breathless and still by Ironheart will. But it’s hard for the Dead to surprise a man whose very *skin* glows in their presence, and those ’saints had been fighting the Dead all their lives.

“The battle was nothing close to brief, and no few of those brave men I’d joked with the night before breathed their last beneath that iron sky. But the ’saints strode among them, each worth hundreds of ordinary men. And at the end of the carnage, the Dead had paid a far steeper toll than we, grey snows drenched with gore and ashes. The battle for the château would be far bloodier, but Voss conceding the city so cheaply had the commanders optimistic; perhaps he *was* weak after his failure at Augustin. And cleaning the blood off her sword, Charlotte ordered her troops up the hill.

“But as I say, we saw none of it. Aaron and I instead rode west, into the cover of a deadwood and thundering downriver. We crossed the frozen Ranger, swung back along the northern banks, and there we found a spray of ice spilling from a rugged cavemouth—the outflow of that tributary beneath the roots of San Maximille, now frozen solid.

“The cave was sealed—a heavy iron grate drilled into the rock. Binding up our horses, Aaron and I locked hands around the rusting bars. Fledglings of Blood Dyvok are stronger than all but the eldest of the other lines, and the Moonsthrone’s strength burned in me still. We growled together, lips peeling back from Aaron’s fangs, my knuckles gone white. And with the scream of tortured metal, we wrenched the bars apart.

“Side by side, we plunged into the gloom. The cave was six feet in the round, but the frozen outflow filled fully half of it, and we were forced to stoop, scuttling into the slopway like crabs. Aaron was a vampire and I paleblooded, but the dark was complete, and I lit a hunter’s lantern at my belt to light our way. Its glow glittered on the twisted, icy path ahead, the *crack* of wheellocks and *shuffshuffshuff!* of mechwork crossbows rising faint over echoes of our crunching boots, my rasping breath.

“‘I pray Lachlan and the others are aright,’ Aaron whispered.

“I smirked over my shoulder. ‘Didn’t think you cared, brother.’

“‘He’s an oafish little cuss, your squire. And if you breathe a word to him, I’ll never speak to you again.’ Aaron shook his head. ‘But the romantic in me can’t help but be a little struck watching him and Charlotte. Did you see the way they looked at each other?’

“‘The same way you look at your Baptiste.’

“‘Do you think they…’

“‘I think that’s a riddle best left unanswered. But if you must pray for anyone, brother, pray for *us*. Heaven knows we’re going to need it.’

“We plunged on, over the frozen flow, the space growing so narrow we were forced to crawl. The air was *breathtakingly* cold, my teeth chattering and bollocks crawling up my throat. But even in that freezing hole, there was yet one thing to be grateful for.”

The silversaint paused, drinking from his goblet. His grey eyes seemed ablur with memory, fixed on that pale moth fluttering upon the chymical globe.

“And that was?” the historian finally asked.

Gabriel blinked, shrugging as he met the vampire's eyes.

"No shit."

Jean-François arched one brow in question.

"It was about the cleanest slopway I've ever visited." Gabriel chuckled. "And in my time, I've visited a few. Once, that ice we crawled along would have been mostly frozen nightsoil and piss, and the way ahead would have been blocked by a buildup of raw sewage, the four and four thousand men in the keep above filling it to brimming. But they were all dead now, of course. Had been for months. And though I'm not such a bastard as to be grateful for the murder of so many, every cloud is lined with silver.

"The reek was still evil, my eyes soon watering. The way grew narrower, ice pressing in about us, and we were forced to slide on our bellies. We came across another portcullis, but the bars were soon wrenched far enough apart for us to slip through. We found another deeper in, dispatched after much swearing and toil. It'd have taken a team of blastmen and engineers hours, maybe *days* to deal with each, and the defenders would've heard the ruckus. Sometimes, even *I* was forced to thank my father for the curse of what I was.

"And so, after perhaps an hour, we saw dim light spilling from a puncture in the stone overhead. Another grate was riveted across it, crusted with frozen filth, and choked with cold corpses. But past those bars waited a stone channel—a nightsoil well—leading up to the château courtyard. We could hear the full-throated roar of war overhead now; cracking wheellocks and singing blades, shattering bone and screaming men. Snatches of testament quotes hung in the blood-thick air with the stink of black ignis and the reek of sundered bowel. And above, I heard the music of silver horns.

"*'For San Michon!'*

"'That's Valentino. He made it through the sally port.'

"'Let's be swift,' Aaron growled.

"Sliding onto our backs, we wrapped fists about the bars, wrenching them apart. I pulled myself up, cursing as I snaked through the corpses piled atop the grate—men and women and children too, fresh murdered by the monsters above. Crawling upward through that tangle of frozen meat, grim and silent, I marveled again at the brutality of these things we fought. Cresting the bodies, I clawed my way up walls slick with frost and slime, Aaron close behind. One last portcullis barred the way, the metal so cold it burned my hands. But a few bars of iron were all that stood between me and the Forever King's throat now, and with the song of splintering stone, I tore it free.

"Chaos awaited. Bitterbleak chill and black smoke and a courtyard *flooded* with the Dead. They took a moment to notice us, bodies toppling in pieces as I sprang from the well, cleaving flesh and splitting bone. But then they were on us, clawing, scrambling, Aaron rising behind me. And just as we'd done at the Twins, we two faced down an army.

"'No fear,' I hissed.

"'Only fury,' Aaron replied.

"The courtyard was vast, slick with frost, snows already drenched red. The château rose at our backs; a black fist rimed with ice, ringed by broad battlements and a deep highwalk, *thronged* with Voss thralls and foulbloods.

"The well we'd burst from stood on the bailey's east side, but the fighting was even thicker on the south. The battlements were a thresher, soldiers in León colors clashing with highbloods and wretched and thralls in Voss livery. Burning foulbloods fell from on high, set ablaze by mechwork bows; an awful, burning rainshower bursting into ash on the frozen cobbles. And in the courtyard beneath, amid the glow of silver ink scribed by my bride's own hands, the brothers Beaufort fought side by side.

"Sweet Mothermaid, the twins were *brilliant*. They were silverclad; Valentino's shirtless chest spattered red, Carlos flinging silverbombs into the crush, the brothers carving their way toward the gatehouse. Those gates were splintering, ice-clad crossbeams cracking as Lachie and Tolman hammered upon their other side, but a wall of wretched were pressing against the timbers now, the sheer weight of numbers holding them closed.

"'Gabriel!' Carlos roared. 'To the gates!'

"Aaron and I began carving our way across the courtyard, Epitaph *boom*ing as it cut great swathes through the Dead. My brother fought as a son of Dyvok that day, dancing the Anyja—the Tempest—his weapon's weight dragging him about as he swung it, spinning, pivoting with the momentum, anything in his path split to pieces. I battled in his wake, skulls crushed and limbs severed, iron on my tongue. The blade I wielded felt *so* strange—for years I'd fought only with Ashdrinker, and finely wrought as Valor was, it could only be a poor second to enchanted starsteel. But the blood of the Moonsthrone burned in my veins, and there's truth to the notion that the blade matters not so much as the hand wielding it.

"Valor would be enough.

"The walls were a slaughterhouse, de León soldiers dying by the hundreds, holy sisters weeping as they raised burning silver wheels and prayed for God's aid. But we were only a hundred yards from the gates now, and if we could break through, split the fight across three fronts, we could *win* this day.

"And then the Princes entered the fray.

"I knew them. Knew them *both*. The sight of them outside my home burned forever into my mind's eye. Four of seven were ashes now; Danton, Alba, Aléne, added to Laure's tally. But three Princes of Forever remained. My heart burned with hate as I set eyes on the pair, the strength of holy mountains aflame within my boiling blood.

"The first had stepped from a tower door on the southern battlements, glowering at the de León soldiers with eyes of midnight. He was square of jaw, thick black hair combed back from a widow's peak, his beard plaited with gold. A cloak made of crow's feathers mantled a suit of dark steel fullplate, and a great double-headed weapon rested on his shoulder, wrought of that same metal. Its business end was fashioned like twinned raven's beaks; some hellish marriage of scythe and maul.

"'Ettiene,' I growled.

"The second strode from the château doors, flung apart with a mighty *boom*. She was tall, pallid features daubed with blood so that her face resembled a skull. Thick braids of black touched her waist, and plate of dark steel shrouded her body, deaths heads adorning every surface. A greatscythe of that same dark steel was poised in her fists, twice as long as a man. And as she raised it toward the Beaufort boys, her name slipped my teeth as a curse.

"'Kestrel.'

"The Iron Maiden and the Black Crow; dark lovers if rumor were true. Only God knows the tally of blood between them, but it must have measured an ocean.

"'Aaron, cover the boys from the Maiden!' I roared. 'I'll take the Crow!'

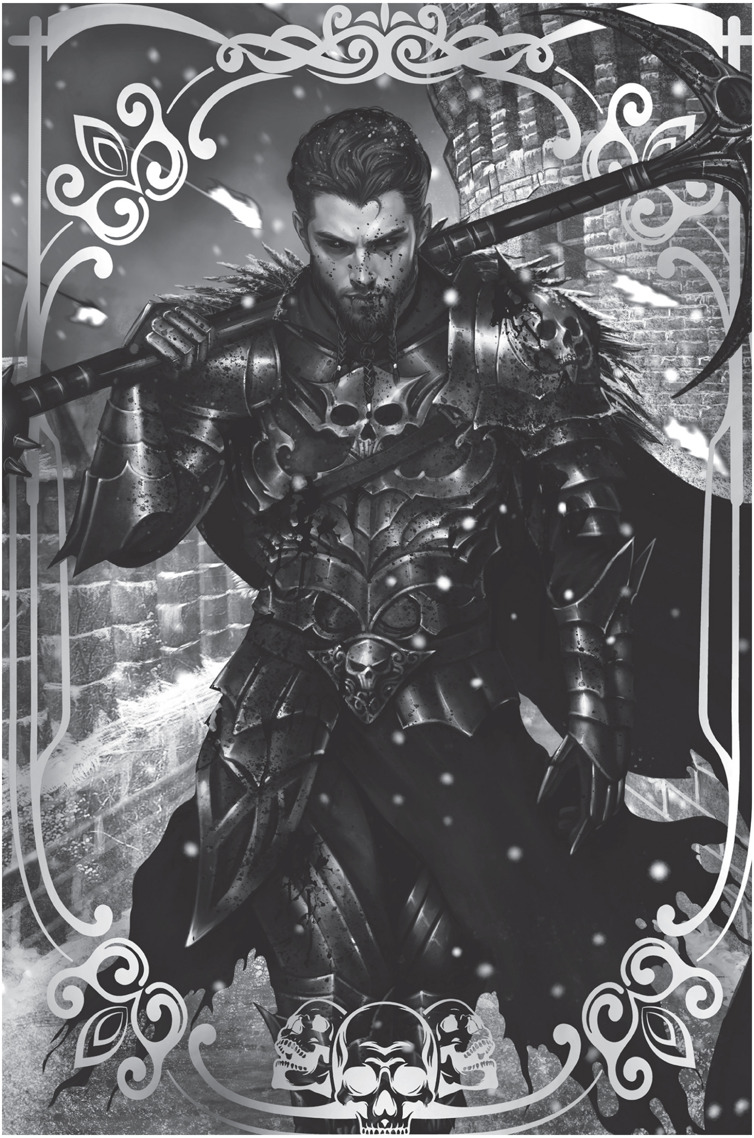
"Aaron glanced toward me amid the bloody hue and cry. His normally immaculate clothes were drenched in gore now, porcelain skin dusted with ashes. He was surrounded by a sea of claws and fangs, but he spared a moment to meet my eyes.

"'God go with you, brother.'

"Cutting right, I carved toward the southern stairs. Valor sang in my hands, volleys of flaming arrows rained upon the walls, *shuffshuffshuff!* filling the air. But though the ranks of our enemies were as thin as we'd hoped, the Beauforts were bogged down with Kestrel now, and Ettiene was carving through our soldiers on the battlements one-handed. Left to his own devices, the Crow would eat those men alive.

"I reached the highwalk, drenched in blood. Glancing beyond the walls, I saw Lachie and Tolman had smashed the outer gates, trying desperately to batter through the final inner doors. Wretched were spilling from the sally ports out among our soldiers, snows running red. Turning from the mangled pile of bodies he'd made, Ettiene's pale lips curled in the coldest of smiles as he saw me.

"*'Long years, de León. Fine day for a reunion, no? '*



"I felt his mind crash upon mine; an avalanche of darkness and ice. But though Phoebe had betrayed me, I still could have kissed her for the gift of her blood as I slammed shut the doors, forcing that bastard out, spitting red onto the frozen stones between us.

"'Finer day for a funeral.'

"Black eyes roamed Valor, drenched in my hand. His smile grew colder.

"*'Think ye shall slay a Prince of Forever with a silvered splinter, boy? '*

"'I've butchered three of your kin already, bastard. Let's make it an even four.’

“Ettiene dragged on his greathelm—dark steel again, crafted like a raven’s beak—raising his maul in salute. Valor held high, I charged across the frozen stone.

“And the battle for this empire was *truly* joined.

“Below in the courtyard, Aaron and my brothers danced with Kestrel, silversteel their song, wheellock fire their drum. The Maiden had charged with more Voss knights at her side, longblades and greatswords in hand. Aaron was first to meet them, hurling himself into the maw as Epitaph cleaved the air, crashing upon the first Voss knight, spinning into a second. Platemail shattered like glass and the two coldbloods were sent flying in pieces, crashing into the walls beneath my feet and bursting into ash.

“Aaron flew on with his blade’s momentum, digging in his heels as he landed, pirouetting with Epitaph’s colossal weight and flinging sideways through the air. My lips split in a savage smile as I realized his target—not Kestrel and her knights, but those wretched pressed against the inner gates, holding Lachie and Tolman at bay. Bringing Epitaph down, Aaron split those foulbloods and crossbeams asunder. Ironwood splintered, bodies *exploded,* Aaron landing in a hail of gore and broken kindling. And with a roar, the gates split apart, at last letting the thousands of soldiers swarming outside *in.*

“And just like that, the tide ran in our favor.

“Up on the battlements, Ettiene’s maul skimmed my chin, his follow-through sent me skidding across the frozen walls. I charged back into him like a hurricane, Valor flashing in the ash-struck air, sending him flying down the highwalk and tumbling across the ice. But he was on his feet again in a blinking, utterly unharmed.

“Here was strife, Historian. For while I was as strong as I’d been in the battle of Dún Maergenn, there was a difference between the day we stormed Nikita’s capital and this.”

“Your aegis,” Jean-François said.

“Oui,” the silversaint sighed. “It no longer burned. While I’d been *told* Dior lived, I’d not seen her with my own eyes. Perhaps my faith had simply taken too many batterings over the years, nothing left inside me to give. Whatever the reason, my ink didn’t glow as it did for my brethren, blinding their foes as they charged into the bailey. And while no end of pisshouse minstrels have claimed me the greatest swordsman who ever lived, Ettiene was a *maestro* with that maul. Strong as I was, fighting alone, he’d have proved my match.

“But I fought not alone that day.

“She crested a troop ladder at my back, Lightbringer aflame. Holy sisters of San Maximille spilling over the ramparts behind her, Charlotte raised that simple wheel of hand-carved rowan wood about her throat in one hand, stepping toward Ettiene without fear.

"'*The Lord is my shield unbreakable!* '

"Bright light flared, the vampire recoiling before Charlotte's dauntless faith. I struck as he stumbled, and though Ettiene's flesh turned my blow aside, his weapon was sent flying from his grip. Desperate to escape the light of Charlotte's wheel, the Black Crow charged, crashing into my chest. My cousin roared my name as the pair of us sailed off the battlements, tangled in each other's arms as we smashed onto the cobbles far below.

"Down in that courtyard, the Iron Maiden now waltzed with the brothers Beaufort. Their aegis was blinding, and long had that pair fought side by side against the Dead. Eirene and Evangeline swooped down from the skies, raking the Iron Maiden's scalp and face with silver-tipped claws, Kestrel cursing as she backed away.

"I've heard it said that twins have a language beyond words—that ofttimes the one will know what the other is thinking without speaking at all. And so it seemed now; the brothers moving like smoke, crashing like waves, blades flashing in the silverlight. But if each Beaufort knowing the other's mind was a boon, it was also twice a curse—Kestrel could read those thoughts, too, if she bent her will to it.

"Carlos wove right, Kestrel spun left. Valentino feinted deftly, but the Iron Maiden stood unmoved, a smile on bloody lips. Both twins struck together, yet the Prince of Forever wove back, seeing each blow coming long before it fell. And as Evangeline and Eirene swooped down to strike again at the Maiden's back, the vampire spun like a dancer and cleaved both falcons from the sky.

"Feathers and mist were all that remained, Carlos roaring in fury. He struck, *head, chest, belly,* Valentino's blade hissing toward Kestrel's knees. As the vampire leapt high, she twisted her weapon's haft, splitting it in two—scythe in one hand, longblade the other. And landing in a crouch, she flung out her arms, each blade catching a Beaufort on its edge.

"Valentino lost his arm, muscle and bone cleaved through. Poor Carlos lost much more, the Maiden's scythe whispering as it flung his head from his shoulders. Valentino *bellowed* his brother's name as he fell, gushing blood from his sundered shoulder. Kestrel spit him like a pig on her longblade, raising her scythe for the deathblow.

"'FOR SAN MICHON!'

"The roar of black ignis split the sky, Kestrel hissing as the air was filled with silver caustic. Silverbombs flew, mechwork bows sang, Lachlan and Tolman leading a charge across the bailey, Aaron at their flank. They were a flood, roaring as they came, men and silversaints plowing into that wall of Dead flesh. Charlotte had secured the southern battlements, waves of men in de León tabards now spilling over the walls.

"I was down on the bloody cobbles, brawling with Ettiene, fists, elbows, teeth. Disarmed, the Prince seized my throat, the strength of the ancien Dead in his grip. And smashing my skull against the flagstones, he *squeezed*.

“‘*My dread father hath foreseen this day, Lion. All thy struggles for naught.*’

“I broke his grip, spitting. ‘Don’t look now, dickhead. But dear Papa is *losing*.’

“Cold light gleamed in black eyes as he laughed, slamming me into the stonework again. ‘*The rivers frozen. Bridges rebuilt. Aready we could have marched to Augustin. Why think ye, we waited here? Why think thee we* allowed *thee in?* ’

“Scrabbling at the buckles, I tore the helmet from Ettiene’s head. The face beneath was cruel, my blood running cold at his smile.

“‘*Witness now thy folly.*’

“They came from the houses. From those streets and alleys in the city below. Not merely hundreds this time, but *thousands*. Men, women, and children, lifeless and rotten, staring up at the château with soulless eyes as their master gave the call.

““ Ware ye! Behind, God Almighty, *BEHIND*!’

“Charlotte stood atop the bloody battlements, pointing back into the city. I understood our mistake in a moment, my belly filled with oily ice. Voss had ambushed us in San Maximille’s streets with but a *fraction* of his number, leaving the rest of his force coiled beneath floorboards and in attics, down cellars and in walls, hidden from our eyes in the sky. He gave us just enough of a fight to fool us, just enough of a victory to make us think him weak. And now he’d snapped shut the jaws of his trap, all of us caught behind its teeth. Dark shadows were flooding up into the streets at our backs now, set to swallow us whole. Horns rang in the gloom, men cried out in terror, half our archers pouring arrows into the Dead ahead, the other half firing at the vampires behind. But their numbers seemed *truly* endless now, crashing upon the walls and scuttling up the stone.

“Ettiene laughed, the abyss in his eyes. But with his helm lost, the advantage was mine. I seized hold of his face, his skin smooth and cold beneath my fingers, thumbs pressed upon his eyes. And at last I unleashed the power within me—the power of the father who’d not cared, but to whom I owed it all. And bucking in my grip, throwing back his head, the Crow roared as his blood began to boil.

“Lachie and Aaron brawled yet with the Maiden, the stones drenched red. Poor Tolman had fallen, split in half by Kestrel’s scythe. The big man looked surprised as he crashed to the cobbles, legs flung one way, rest of him the other. He stared down at the steaming tangle of his innards, face twisted. And true to himself, true to the last, the Scarred spoke but one word as he died.

“‘*F-fuck…*’

“Lachie and Aaron fought together against the Prince now, but in truth, it was a partnership ill-made. The light of Lachlan’s aegis burned Aaron just as fierce as Kestrel, and Aaron's form was the Anyja, not the steps of a silversaint—the pair were unused to fighting side by side. Kestrel sent Lachlan flying with a thunderous boot to his chest, his ribs shattering like glass. Slipping Aaron's blow, she answered with her own, that scythe singing as it came. Aaron cried out as the blade cleaved his right arm off at the shoulder, Kestrel's longblade spilling long spools of his guts right across the bailey.

"*'AARON!'*

"Ettiene still in my grip, I turned at that shout, cursing as I spied a bloody *fool* upon the battlements. Baptiste had broken his promise, standing on the red highwalk. Slamming a quiver into his crossbow, he let loose, bolts streaking across the yard, *shuffshuffshuff!* But the Maiden simply stood in that burning rain, flaming arrows shattering on her armor, her skin, her *eye,* fire and steel no more use than a butterknife against battlements of stone.

"Gazing up at the blackthumb, Kestrel brushed a speck of soot from her cheek.

"And she smiled.

"Distracted by Baptiste's arrival, I'd taken my eyes off my prize. Ettiene's veins were boiled dry, but he was yet a Prince of Forever, and I gasped as he drew a dagger and drove it into my body so hard the blade *snapped* on the stones beneath me. With a roar, Ettiene tore his dagger loose, my guts coming with it, and in that *shocking* wash of pain, I lost my grip. He broke free, skin cracked and smoking, and both of us injured near to dying, the Black Crow tumbled off my chest and crashed onto the stone beside me.

"The Maiden saw the Crow fall, turning toward me with death in her eyes. But Lachlan flew back into the fray, lips bloodied, ribs shattered, still unbroken. Holding in my minced innards with one hand, I staggered upright, Ettiene groaning on the cobbles nearby. Blood flowed around me like wine, blades flashed like sunlight on water, Lachlan's sword crashing against Kestrel's. But Charlotte roared warning, fighting back-to-back with Baptiste. More Dead were flooding up from the city below, spilling through the broken gates, over the walls, too hungry, too many, too late. But still I refused to believe.

"After all I'd suffered, all I'd lost …

"It couldn't end like *this*.

"*'Enough?'*

"The word rang on the frozen air, in every heart and mind. The weight of him pressed down like gravity, deeper than the gulfs between dying stars, each breath a thousand years in the taking. Frost hung at my bloody lips, the air so blisteringly cold it hurt to breathe. And past Lachlan and Kestrel brawling in the forecourt, I caught movement, turning now to behold the sum of all my hate and rage.

"He stood atop the château steps, doors flung wide as if to invite me in.

He was clad in a long coat of white silk brocade and lace, lustrous hair swept back from a brow too kingly for any mortal crown, the snow not even daring to fall upon him. He was *exactly* as I remembered; bloodless, changeless, deathless. That youth, fey and fearsome, bleached ash white by centuries past counting and sins past reckoning, bottomless eyes fixed upon me, lips curled in the smallest kind of smile.

"'*Enough?* ' he asked again. '*Old friend?* '

"Madness took me then, red and complete. Eyes gone wild and fangs bared, I snatched up Valor from where she'd fallen. And snapping the vial from my throat, smearing Dior's blood upon the blade, I *flew* across that courtyard. The Dead between Fabién and me were left in ashes, Dior's blood setting all about me ablaze as I charged up the steps.

"'*VOSS!* '

"The blade whistled past his neck, just a hair's breadth from porcelain skin as he slipped aside. I swung again, all the hate of a father untethered, a husband widowed, a saint godless behind that blow, almost blinded by the tears in my eyes.

"But again, he stepped aside.

"'*Thou shalt not slay me, old friend.*'

"Again I struck, again he moved like silver. Valor's edge skimmed so close to the bastard's black heart that his brocade split, pearl buttons spinning into the air. I stabbed toward his chest, but he was already gone, the air left cold and vacant. He was swift as death, that devil, his mind skimming mine, every blow seen before it fell.

"'*So beautiful.*'

"My blade whistled past his cheek.

"'*So perfect.*'

"Again, across his chin.

"'*Ever the lion I made thee.*'

"'You make *nothing*! You only *take*!'

"I lunged again, Dior's blood gleaming on Valor's edge. One strike, one scratch, I could end this all, God *help me* …

"'*Still thy lust unsated? Thy lesson unlearned? How deep shall the ocean of blood betwixt us run, Gabriel? Where shall all this end?* '

"I stepped forward, knuckles white, spit hissing through my fangs.

"'It ends *today*.'

"Valor scythed toward his heart, all my hate behind the blow. In desperation, Voss caught my wrist, my strike held at bay. But in doing so, he'd put himself within my reach.

"'It ends with *you*.'

"And at last, *at long last,* my hand closed upon his throat.

"'*Will it?* '

"I held still, fingers at his neck, just one breath from boiling that bastard's veins dry. But in that breath, I realized the whole battle around us had stilled, all of San Maximille fallen silent, no motion now save the snow falling from those funeral skies. Aaron lay on his back, armless and torn, surrounded by an ocean of wretched. The Iron Maiden stood above Lachlan, scythe pressed into his throat. On the battlements, Baptiste and Charlotte were surrounded by foulbloods, Ettiene at their head. All about me, soldiers in de León colors were bleeding, gasping, caught beneath claws and blades and teeth, thousands of men and women but one heartbeat, one *breath* from their endings.

“But none of those deathblows were falling.

“*‘Shall I? ’*

“My gaze returned to Fabién, caught yet in my grip. My fingers sank into the marble of his neck, my father’s power tingling beneath my skin. Just one moment from—

“*‘I could slay them all, Gabriel. And yet, rage I cannot harbor in my heart, for he who hath given me so much. Were not the sun blacked aready, I would surely tear it from the sky before suffering its garish light to touch her. Such perfect grace. Such breathless beauty.’*

“Ruby lips curled.

“*‘Well I can see, old friend, why ye so adored her.’*

“I heard soft footsteps in the château behind me then.

“Heart freezing as Voss’s words rang in my head.

“*Only four of eight remain now …*

“Eight, not seven.

“I met his gaze, my own already burning with tears.

“‘No…’

“*‘Told thee,’* he smiled, ‘*thy famille awaited.’*”

High in the tower of Sul Adair, the Last Silversaint took up his wine. Not his goblet, but his bottle; the last drops of his famille’s vineyards, another legacy run to dust. He drank without pause, swallowing deep and grimacing at the grit in the dregs. Dropping the bottle onto the stone, he dragged silver knuckles across bloodshot eyes.

“I’ve told you about the weight of two words, Historian. How much power can reside in such tiny things. How many hearts have been made complete by words so small as *I do*? How many shattered with a breath as tiny as *It’s over*? How many lives undone, how many souls filled, how many empires crumbled with the power and peril of just two little words?”

Gabriel shook his head.

“‘But how much joy and horror in one?

“*‘Papa? ’*

“One word. Knocking the breath from my lungs and bringing my world to its knees. And releasing my grip on that devil’s throat, I *saw* her, like she’d been ripped from the gossamer of my dreams and remade upon this earth.

Willow slender, so young, God, far *too* young. Her dress black as ravens' feathers, her skin pale as death, her mama's hair and her papa's eyes, staring at me from the dark.

"*'Papaaaaa! '*

"A woman stood behind her, alabaster skin and crimson gown; another of the devils who'd knocked that night on our door. But from Morgane's shadow, my angel flew, running toward me with tears in her lashes and her smile as wide as heaven's sky. And as she crashed into my embrace, it mattered not that her tears were made of blood and the corners of her smile edged with little knives of pearl. Because she was back in my arms.

"She was mine again.

"My baby.

"My …

"'Patience.'"

X

COME THE BLOOD-RED DAWN

"OH, GABRIEL."

Jean-François's hand was pressed to his dead heart, his voice a whisper.

"Oh, you poor *bastard*."

The silversaint sighed. Dragging his hands back through his hair, he sat with spine bent and shoulders hunched. His eyes were shot through with crimson cracks, fixed upon that moth battering upon the globe. Nudging the empty bottle with his boot, he murmured.

"I'm thirsty, coldblood."

"You told me your daughter was *dead,* you said—"

"Jean-François."

The silversaint met the vampire's eyes.

Smudged with shadows.

Brimming with madness.

"I'm *thirsty*."

Their eyes drifted, each with the other, across the stone floor toward the door. There, in the sliver of light beneath the iron cuff, a shadow could be seen.

"… Perhaps you could call Meline to fetch another bottle."

Gabriel's eyes drifted back to the vampire, embers burning in cool storm grey.

"Perhaps … we might share a drink."

Chocolat eyes glittered at that, pale lips curling.

“*Tsk tsk tsk*. Trying to distract me, mon ami. Shame on you.’

“No distractions. No bullshit. I’m *thirsty,* Jean-François.”

The vampire’s smile faded, dark eyes agleam. All his blood-drunk fancies of the past few nights surfacing, the stare between them deepening, the chymistrie fair crackling in the air. He was a liar, was Gabriel de León. A serpent in an angel’s guise. But Jean-François had dragged enough innocents into sin that he could recognize another sinner when he saw one. And Gabriel de León was no stranger to wickedness, that much was plain.

Yet still …

“Be that as it may,” the historian said, “you simply *cannot* leave your tale there. Your nemesis but a handsbreadth away and your daughter resurrected in your arms and your comrades all poised at death’s door?”

The vampire shook his head, marveling.

“What in God’s name did you *do*?”

“The only thing I could, coldblood.”

The silversaint rose from his chair, leathers creaking as he walked to the window on colt’s legs. He gazed beyond the glass, the peaks of the Hawkspire Pass rising in the cloud-struck gloom. The storm still raged outside, winds lashing ancient stone, snows crusted on the glass. But somewhere out there, Jean-François knew the Voss were riding hard, the Iron Maiden drawing closer, ever *closer* toward this man’s end.

Will I weep at his death, as I told him?

Or was it easier just to lie?

“Patience clung to me as I got to my feet,” Gabriel said. “My legs were shaking so badly, I feared I’d not be able to rise. But walking out across the château stairs, I bellowed for our men to hold. Not to lay down their arms, mind you. Not surrender. But to hold, God, *hold* for one moment while I clawed my way to the heart of this madness.

“Valentino was dead, bled out on cold stone, his sword yet hanging from my numbed fingers. My eyes fell on Lachlan, on Aaron, heart crawling into my throat. Kestrel stood poised with her scythe at Lachie’s neck, Aaron surrounded by foulbloods on the bloody cobbles behind her. And though the former was but a breath from decapitation, the latter a heartbeat from being devoured, both still sighed at the sight of that pale angel in my arms, squeezing me so tight I could barely breathe.

“‘Brother,’ Lachie whispered.

“‘Oh, Gabriel…’ Aaron breathed.

“‘*Hold!* ’ I roared again. ‘*Put up your swords!* ’

“Bewildered, bloodied, Charlotte saw the little girl in my arms, and she too roared the order. All around the courtyard, upon the walls, soldiers drenched in blood eased back, eyes wide and hearts hammering under the cold gaze of the corpse army around them.

“They were motionless. All of them. Thousands upon *thousands* of monsters, rotten skin and sunken eyes, pallid flesh and gleaming fangs, all held perfectly still by the power of a monster greater still. His thralls looked toward him, the halls of their minds ringing with the iron of his command, his children gazing with ebon eyes upon their Forever King.

"He stood behind me. Wreathed in that unlight so bitterbleak it froze the soul.

"'*No greater gift,*' Voss smiled, '*than love of family.*'

"'I missed you.'

"The words were a cold whisper against my ear. My daughter drew back from my embrace, and my heart was cleaved in two to see her cheeks were wet and red, her eyes filmed pink by bloody tears. But the smile …

"God help me, that smile was still *hers*.

"'I missed you too, baby. *So* much.'

"Patience squeezed me again, such awful strength in her slender arms, long black hair plastered to the blood on my face.

"'Papa Fabién told me you were coming, but I didn't believe him.'

"'*Papa* Fabién…'

"Patience smiled and brushed the hair from my face, slick with ash and gore. And as she gazed upon me, my beautiful angel, eyes shining with purest joy at the father she adored, she licked the blood from her fingers like jam from a sweet roll overflown.

"'Where have you been, Papa?'

"I almost didn't hear her, near blinded by horror and rage.

"'… Papa?'

"'I was busy, baby. I was trying to … I w-was keeping a promise.'

"'To who?'

"I faltered then, looking toward my friends. My *brothers*.

"'… It doesn't matter anymore.'

"'*Shall we talk, old friend?* '

"I looked to Fabién then, my heart athunder, my mind almost unmoored. He'd stepped back, molten porcelain, gesturing within the château.

"'You let them go.' I glanced to my friends, my men, scattered and spattered and bleeding on frozen stone. 'You let them *go,* Voss.'

"'*Go?* ' A thin frown marred his perfect brow. '*Why would I let them go, old friend? Honored guests, thee and thine. Now that quick tempers hath cooled.*'

"'No games. No lies, no bullshit—'

"'Papa!' Patience scolded, grey eyes gone wide. 'That's a wicked word.'

"Fabién smiled then. '*Well raised, our daughter, no? A perfect young Prince.*'

"'I *told* you, Papa Fabién.' Patience pouted. 'I'm not a prince, I'm a princess.'

"'*Just so, my love. But the garish daystar be yet abroad and sweet nightfall still uncome. Time for all good princesses to be abed.*'

"'But I want to stay with Papa! I missed him, please don't make me go!'

"*'Thy papa and I have much to discuss, my heart sweetest, my love dearest. But he shall return to thee anon. And then, he shall sing thee to sleep as once he used to, remember? Thy heart would gladden at that, aye? '*

"'Will you, Papa?' Patience asked, searching my eyes. 'Will you sing for me?'

"'Of c-course I will.'

"'Why are you crying, Papa?'

"I shut my eyes and drew her close. 'I just missed you is all.'

"'I missed you too. I love you so much.'

"'Oh, *God help me,* I love you too.'

"*'Come now, Patience. Go with sweet sister Morgane.'*

"My angel released her grip only reluctantly, showering my cheeks with kisses before she slipped from my arms. My heart was torn asunder to let her go, but all still felt poised on the edge of a knife here—I dared not risk endangering her so soon after being reunited. Licking bloody lips, Patience walked to the vampire she'd arrived with, shrouded in a beautiful red gown and a stole of grey fox. Taking Morgane's pale hand, my daughter turned to me and blew me another kiss, eyes gleaming like silver in the dark.

"'Godmorrow, Papa.'

"'Sweet dreams, b-baby.'

"She shook her head then, smiling. 'Vampires don't dream, silly.'

"In the blood-soaked courtyard, all across the battlements, awful stillness reigned. Corpses frozen, pallid and rotten, fangs gleaming in hungry mouths. Soldiers with bloody blades and bloodless faces stood paralyzed, wondering what in God's name could come next. The Crow and the Maiden both stood ready to murder my friends, but Voss glanced toward his daughter, then his son, no movement wasted, no order given. At once, Ettiene eased away from Charlotte's back, Kestrel lifting her scythe from Lachlan's throat.

"*'Shall we speak inside, old friend? '*

"I turned to him then, trembling with hatred. 'Speak of *what*?'

"*'Told thee, did I. Cometh the blood-red dawn, I should teach thee of the Faithless, Gabriel. The deceit they hath spun, and the doom they hath brung.'*

"'Nothing you say will matter. All you are is lies.'

"*'Evil I am, through and through. Servant to an evil higher, I vow it true. But I tell thee now, old friend, by ev'ry drop of blood I hath spilled, ev'ry city I hath slaved, ev'ry babe I hath slaughtered, there be no greater evil 'pon this wretched earth than the one thy sister serves. Let me tell thee now, of that plague we did name Faithless.'*

"'We can't trust him!'

"I turned at Baptiste's call, echoing across the bloody battlements.

"'Godssakes, you can't *trust him,* Gabriel!'

"Lachlan had dragged himself upright, gasping for breath. Throat drooling blood, he met my eyes, his own brimming with tears.

"'Don't do it, Gabe.'

"*'No more blood shall I here spill. Courtesy do I offer thee, under forms of Old. No demand shall I make of thee, Gabriel. No snare shall I lay for thee, no dirge shall I play for thee. And when my piece is spake, I shall offer thee the simplest of choices.'*

"Aaron scoffed. 'Kneel or die.'

"*'At thy throats are my legions already slaked, Aaron Dyvok. Enough for trek to Augustin, at least. No need hath I for thy dregs. Shouldst departure be thy wish at council's end, I shall harry not thy steps. In peace shall ye enter, and in peace ye may depart.'*

"Black eyes fell on mine, empty as fresh graves.

"*'I shall e'en allow thee to take our daughter with thee, Gabriel. Should ye wish.'*

"'*Our* daughter?'

"*'So she be. My old friend.'*

"'Then what choice are you offering? Listen to your bullshit then leave or…? *What?* What other option is there?'

"*'Join me, of course.'*

"Lachlan actually laughed at that, sharing an incredulous glance with Aaron. But though the rage in me was seething, the horror sickening, none of it was blinding. I knew he was made of purest deceit, but in one matter at least, Fabién Voss had spoke true.

"He could've killed us.

"He could have butchered us all.

"And yet …

"More figures had gathered in the entrance hall now, pale and beautiful—an entire *court* of finely frocked highbloods he'd not bothered to bring to bear. Well-heeled servants hovered nearby, holding trays laden with brimming goblets. I stood bewildered as a page in Voss livery stepped forward and offered to take my coat. The Forever King bowed low, languid and graceful, arm swept out toward his château. Pale lace dripped from his sleeve, his head inclined like some genteel laerd, inviting honored guests into his home.

"*'Enter freely, and of thine own will.'*

"I could feel his eyes on me, thoughts brushing mine like a lover's, like a father not my father. I pictured my angel then, cold and hard but real, God, *real* in my arms, my soul chilled at the memory of her razorblade smile, licking that blood off her fingers like …

"Voss smiled. Like all light's dying. And I remembered Mama's journal then.

"Daysdeath hadn't even *fallen* in the nights Wulfric knew her.

"There *was* no darkness yet across the skies.

"*So what blackened veil had he been talking about?*

“I looked to my brothers. My friends. My men. Then back toward that open maw.

“And what could I do, vampire?

“What could I do?

“I walked inside.”

XI

LIKE DARK AT DAWNING

GABRIEL DE LEÓN, Black Lion of Lorson, Savior of Nordlund and Sword of the Realm, hung his head. He'd returned to his armchair, leather creaking as he sat, palms pressed against his temples. Jean-François could hear the tempo of his pulse, a sirensong luring him ever closer to perilous rocks. The vampire was writing swiftly, smooth script flowing from his quill. But at last he reached the ending, those three fateful words—not as dreadful as two or awful as one, but portentous nonetheless.

"I'm thirsty."

"So you said, Gabriel."

"Jean-François…"

The Last Silversaint leaned into the light, and glancing up, the historian again glimpsed the darkness welling behind the blood-red scrawl across his eyes. Jean-François could see the weight of the past few nights on his prisoner now. The effort of dredging these sorrows up from the past had wrought a toll, deeper than the Marquis had realized. It was as Gabriel had said—the only weapon in the war against yourself is yourself.

And all great weapons break in the end.

"Please."

The silversaint wrung his hands and shuddered.

"God help me, I *need* it."

Gabriel stared, the historian matching his gaze. Sucking the plump swell of his lower lip into his mouth, the vampire bit down softly, eyes burning now. He'd be lying to himself if he said he hadn't wanted this. If kith dreamed at all, he'd surely have been dreaming of it every night. Dark chocolat eyes roamed those strong hands, those broad shoulders, up, up to the silversaint's throat. He surely couldn't linger there—that silver would burn his tongue to cinders. But not every part of the silversaint's body was inked.

Nothing below his belt, presumably.

God, he was beautiful.

He'd be dead soon, Jean-François knew it. The Liathe spoke truth when she said his Empress would not suffer the silversaint to live. And if de León *was* to be torn apart for the amusement of the Voss, what better place than here?

What better time than now?

He was dangerous, of that there could be no doubt. But Delphine and his cadre were right outside that door, and if the silversaint *were* foolish enough to attempt violence again, Jean-François could use the gifts of his blood as he'd done last time. Splitting apart into the verminshape and leaving Gabriel with naught but a handful of clothes.

Assuming he was wearing any by then …

Images flickered across his mind's eye; bloody lips roaming silken skin, warm flesh prickling beneath wandering hands, throbbing heat and pulsing veins and open, hungry mouths. Jean-François imagined the silversaint pressing in behind him, predatory, strong hands knotted in his hair, pulling his head back, oh, oui, *harder*. He pictured the silversaint before him now, Meline sinking to her knees and unbuckling Gabriel's belt as Jean-François brushed long ink-black locks away from that delicious milk-white neck.

Would he make him beg?

Just how much would he enjoy it?

This might be his last chance to find out.

"Meline."

The door swung wide on silent hinges. His faithful majordomo awaited on the other side, hands clasped like the eternal penitent.

"Master?"

"Our guest is thirsty, love."

"Your will be done, Master."

Their eyes were still locked, silversaint and vampire, as the thrall slipped into the room. She stepped toward the little table, intent on the empty bottle, the dry goblet. But she froze as he spoke again.

"Shut the door a moment, would you, love?"

Her pupils dilated at that, pulse running swift. She swallowed thick, gaze drifting from the silversaint to Jean-François. The vampire was motionless, eyes still on Gabriel's, smoldering. But the silversaint broke, stealing a swift glance; creamy bosom swelling above the bounds of her bodice, the pale heaven of her throat beyond.

"Your will be done, Master."

Meline turned, trembling like a doe. The thralls outside watched, stern and silent, Delphine's brow arching as she closed the door between them. Meline paused, smooth brow pressed against the timbers, taking one long breath to steady herself. But she sighed as she sensed him, rising slow, looming behind her now, skin prickling. Turning, she looked up at him, swallowed completely in the storm grey of those hungry eyes.

"Say please, madame," Gabriel growled.

Her breath caught at those words, heart running ever quicker. Meline glanced to Jean-François, still in his armchair. The tome was set aside now, the quill tucked away, the vampire's clever hands upon his folded lap.

"Master…"

"Do as you will, Meline. Leave if you wish. Stay if you want. But *only* if you want."

Gabriel reached up, one sharp fingernail drifting down her throat, over her choker of dark lace and jewels. His nail caught, hooked inside, dragging it down, *down*. Meline's pulse was near unmoored now, heart thrashing against her ribs as she gazed up at the man she so despised. Jean-François knew what she wanted. What *all* of them wanted. The bliss of the Kiss was a rapture unmeasured. But being Kissed twice over …

The choker snapped, Meline gasped, jewels scattered on the floor. Jean-François rose from his chair, stalking toward his prey. Meline watched over her shoulder through the haze of her lashes, shivering as he closed in behind, caught between the pair of them now. Gabriel met his eyes, and Jean-François smiled as he saw that beast so oft mentioned, rising through those perilous depths.

He wondered if he might master it.

If it would try to master him.

Which would delight me more?

Gabriel's hand was at Meline's cheek now, turning her back toward him, breasts heaving above her corset as he traced the bee-stung bow of her lips. Jean-François listened to the rush of her heartbeat as she kissed the silversaint's fingertips one after another, tongue flickering, sucking his thumb into her mouth. Her hand was at his belt buckle now, toying, slipping lower and caressing his cock through his leathers. Jean-François laced his fingers through Meline's braids, pulling back her head ever so slight, smiling as a low moan slipped from somewhere deep inside her.

Gabriel dipped his mouth toward her submission, breath hot against Meline's skin.

But again, his gaze flickered to Jean-François.

"Say please."

The vampire smiled, the thrall moaned, both now trembling. One word stood between them and bliss, between the chill of this cell and the ecstasy of the Kiss.

“Please,” they whispered.

Gabriel bit down, fangs sinking home, and between the three of them, Jean-François knew not who groaned the louder. The vampire held Meline poised, the silk of her gown soft beneath his hands as he slipped it down, down, leaving shoulders and breasts bared. Her hands were in the silversaint’s britches now, buckle loosed, cock set free, Jean-François shivering as he at last laid eyes upon it. Flushed with blood, pulsing with hot, luscious life, God in heaven, he could scarcely *wait.* But instead, he scattered cool kisses across the other side of Meline’s throat, down that thundering carotid, fangs scraping her skin.

Meline trembled in his arms, moaning as Gabriel swallowed deeper. The silversaint was rucking up her skirts, layer upon layer of black chiffon gathered in his fists. Jean-François’s lips wandered across the nape of her prickling neck, closer to where Gabriel drank. Their cheeks touched, burning mortal skin against deathless marble, lips drifting closer to Gabriel’s own, still latched upon Meline’s throat. Jean-François leaned in farther, almost near enough to kiss as he felt the silversaint’s hand snake into his hair.

A prickle of fear, of outrage, of shivering, belly-deep delight as Gabriel pulled him back, blond curls knotted in his fist. The silversaint broke from Meline’s neck, meeting Jean-François’s eyes now. He loosed his grip, allowing the vampire enough slack to lunge for those lips, rouged with hot, fresh crimson. Licking upward from Gabriel’s chin, Meline’s blood on his tongue, the vampire sought the silversaint’s mouth. But snarling, *smiling,* Gabriel tightened his grip again, denying Jean-François his prize, instead forcing him down onto the punctures he had himself just bitten.

Jean-François groaned, adoring the place the silversaint had just kissed. His tongue roamed sundered skin, tasting hot spit and blood, Meline moaning as he swallowed. The rubied essence of life, burning with all hell’s heat, sliding down his throat into the hole naught else might fill. He couldn’t remember when last he felt so *alive,* mind’s eye aflame with thoughts of what was to come; bodies bent and spit and riven hilt-deep, secrets soft and wet and warm, a bliss-drunk triangle of flesh, a song of sighs, only blood its end.

Gabriel sank lower, red kisses writ across Meline’s breasts, suckling, teasing, biting. She’d near-swooned now, drunk with desire as the silversaint descended, past those rucked-up spools of chiffon, sinking to his knees before her. Groaning, she spread her legs wider, tangled her fingers in his hair, whispering, pleading as she dragged him in.

The vampire had slowed his suckling, allowing Meline’s pulse to do the work. She bucked against him as Gabriel reached the shadow between her legs, but not long he lingered, Meline gone tense as two bowstrings as his kisses turned to the smooth silk of her thigh, the femoral artery waiting beneath. Jean-François had switched shoulders now, pressing blood-slick lips to pale skin, Meline breathless with anticipation. And as Gabriel bit down, so too did he, her spine arched and head thrown back as the Kiss took hold her soul.

"*Ohhhh GOD…*"

They drank her. Her every muscle taut, every breath a groan, ecstasy and agony all the same. For three long mouthfuls, four, five, they shared her, a moment of perfect red communion, and *so* much more to come. Jean-François's thoughts were alight with it; what he would do to them, what he would *make* them do. The silversaint was rising now, lips slicked red, up, *up* from the heat between those shivering thighs, Jean-François reaching for his cock, their eyes locking as his fingers finally found it, so hard and smooth and shockingly warm as Gabriel drew back his hand and plunged the silversteel dagger

right

into

his

heart.

The vampire gasped, eyes gone wide, the pain, oh *God,* the *PAIN*. Gabriel *twisted* the blade he'd stolen from Meline's thigh, pinning Jean-François to the door and hurling her aside, the thrall so drained she could do naught but crumple as she hit the wall. Gabriel's bloody breath was hot on Jean-François's skin, one hand holding that awful silvered knife, the other slipping into his britches and seizing hold of his bollocks.

"I told you I'd make you scream."

The vampire did just that, head thrown back as his blood began to boil. The agony was *unspeakable,* but pinioned by that cursed silversteel, he couldn't take the verminshape. Helpless and writhing, he could only wail again, for his guards, for his mother, for *anyone* as his nethers shriveled and his skin turned black and his veins bubbled and cracked.

A roar came from outside, thralls smashing against the timbers. But the silversaint had him pinned against the door, and flushed with Meline's blood, Gabriel's strength was obscene. The door shuddered as Delphine threw himself against it, roaring the Marquis's name. Jean-François could only scream in reply, Gabriel leaning close, closer now.

Fingers sinking deeper.

Lips close enough to kiss.

"P-please," Jean-François whispered.

He looked into the face of his ending. Fifty years of bliss and blood had all come down to this. He'd known who and what he was serving. Who *she* had served in turn. Yet he'd chosen to bend the knee all the same. Because it was easier. Because he felt he owed her. But more and most, because in truth, he'd *enjoyed* it.

“I don’t w-want to die, Gabriel.”

He looked into those storm-grey eyes, the hellfire awaiting.

“I don’t want to b-b-burn.”

His veins were dry as kindling, body one breath from annihilation. Their eyes met, a brief second of understanding, a smile on bloody lips.

“A believer at last,” Gabriel whispered.

He flung Jean-François aside, tearing the door open and letting in the thralls. Delphine came first, the silversaint’s strike so brutal that the dagger punched through the capitaine’s face and out the back of his skull.

Jean-François collapsed against the wall, Meline gasping beside him, so badly wounded he could only watch. He’d spent nights listening to the silversaint talking of his battles, but he realized he’d never actually *seen* this man fight in the flesh. Legend had it Gabriel de León was the greatest swordsman who’d ever lived, but at *every* opportunity, the silversaint had dismissed those stories as fancy, scoffing of tales swelling in the telling, and ever in the wrong direction.

But now, Jean-François saw the awful truth.

Gabriel de León was *magnificent*. A blood-drenched poet, carving the notes of some savage song into the flesh of the men around him. Twelve beats of a mortal’s heart passed, twelve strikes of that blade fell, and at the end, twelve thralls lay dead on the stone. Drenched red, not even short of breath, Gabriel de León bound his britches closed and turned toward the vampire, still lying blackened and helpless on the floor.

“I just gave you forever, Jean-François. Use it wisely.”

And like dark at dawning, he was gone.

BOOK FOUR

THIS BLACKENED VEIL

A great mortal host gathered at the walls of Charbourg; crusaders assembled by Emperor and Pontifex outside the city where the Redeemer had given his life for his flock. But in their shadow mustered an army the likes of which the night had never seen. Kith of Voss and Dyvok and Ilon and Chastain were there summoned; children and siblings and lovers to those slain by Illia and her Red Crusade. Fabién, sire of all Ironhearts, was their dread captain. And to their enemy, he gave a name.

No longer Esana, but Esani.

No more Faithful, but Faithless.

And to their annihilation did he bend his dark will.

—Luthiel Chastain
The Knights of the Blood, a history

I

TO THE ABYSS

THE GATES OF Sul Adair opened with the song of splintering ice, the groan of frozen hinges.

The Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain stood at his Empress's right hand, watching the great portcullis rise like an executioner's blade. As always, three more had opened in sequence before it, clearing the path through four baileys, encircled by mighty ramparts of ironstone. Gears rimed with ice crackled and moaned, roaring winds whipping flurries of grey snow up the long cobbled road to the outer walls. Watching the tiny figures approaching from its far end, the Marquis felt his lower lip tremble.

Frost clung to his lashes, golden hair whipping about his face in the bitterbleak gale. His flailing curls were again an annoyance, but dressing had been purest agony, and the historian had decided that binding back his hair was simply too much effort. He might have called for Dario's help, but the wounds the silversaint had left him were ghastly; he'd no desire for the thrall to see the blackened, mangled mess between his legs. And though the hurts would heal in time, Jean-François already knew from experience it would take nights of agony before he was whole again.

"Gabriel," he hissed. "You *utter* bastard."

What remained of Margot's court was again assembled upon the château steps, gathered around their eldest in their wall of silk and fur and brocade. The Empress wore a different gown than yestereve—her golden velvet and midnight lace were drenched in blood from the feast. Instead, she was clad in crimson, the bodice form-fitting, the skirts and train so long they were borne by no less than four thralled maids. A mantle of true direwolf fur was draped about her shoulders, and her four great black wolves sat in a row before her.

Hunched miserable at his Empress's side, the Marquis studied the cadre trotting beneath the gatehouse arches. A dozen deathless knights rode in the vanguard, threescore thralls in their wake. They sat once-proud horses, but the beasts had been flogged near dead to get here, breath steaming through bloody teeth. The knights were clad in fullplate of dark steel, their leader mantled with a cloak of heartsblood red. Greathelms hid their faces, eyes glittering through the slits.

As the storm rocked iron-grey skies overhead, a figure glided up to his side, Jean-François stiffening as she slipped an arm through his. A tall and stately femme, attired in a gown of fabulous black silk, golden hair circling her brow in a beautiful wreath. A tiny puff of fluff was clutched to her pale bosom in lieu of pearls.

"Is it *true*?" she hissed.

"Viscontessa Nicolette." Jean-François winced. "H-how now, sweet niece?"

"Uncle Jean-François, is it *true*? You allowed the silversaint t—"

The puff of fluff *yap*ped, beady eyes on the oncoming cadre. A dozen Dead glares fell upon the Viscontessa, and the Empress herself turned to regard her grandchild, black eyes burning with such terrible outrage it might have melted the grey flurries about them. Cowed into perfect stillness, little Henri fell silent. Nicolette likewise bowed her head and shut her admittedly pretty mouth.

Bringing her steaming horse to a halt, the lead rider climbed from her steed, landing in the frost like a stone. A greatscythe was strapped to her saddle, a dreadful motif of skulls embossed into her magnificent armor. She removed her greathelm, long black braids swept back from her princely brow. Her face was as beautiful as it was cold, cheeks and eyes daubed with old blood in the seeming of a death's-head.

"*Margot of the Blood Chastain.*" She bowed. "*I bid thee greetings, Priori.*"

"Kestrel of the Blood Voss." Margot inclined her head, thunder cracking the skies overhead. "We bid thee welcome, Priori."

The vampires stared at each other, eyes black as the road to hell. The air between trembled, all the figures about them deathly still. The storm wind was a clawing, howling beast, buffeting Margot's silken gown and bejeweled braids. But not a single hair on the Iron Maiden's head moved in that gale—as if it were wrought of iron like her flesh.

"*We thank thee for invitation to thy beautiful home,*" Kestrel finally said.

Margot smiled. "Given freely and with Courtesy, as in nights of Old. No gifts of the Blood shall be in these halls wielded, no wrath nor rancor abided.

Under banner of pax doth we eldest here convene, for the betterment of our empire entire."

"Our *empire*."

Kestrel smiled too at that, dried blood cracking upon her lips. Jean-François watched her gaze roam the ice-thick battlements, the dark stones, finally returning to his dam.

"*Where be the Draigann? Kariim is yet to rear his serpent's head, but know we, the Untamed slithered 'cross thy threshold well afore we. Be the fresh-faced Priori of Dyvok so uncivil as to neglect greetings for his elder and better?*"

"The Dyvok are occupied with matters of state. Return shall they, anon."

Jean-François swallowed thickly at that, Nicolette watching him sidelong.

"Shall we retire within, Priori?" Margot asked. "This weather be of foulest measure. Warm stead and warmer bodies await. Enter freely, and of thine own will."

Kestrel ignored Margot's invitation, eyes returning to those storm-struck walls. Thrallswords in dark steel patrolled the highwalks, twin wolves and twin moons emblazoned on black cloaks. That ebon stare fell now on Margot's court; the wind-struck counts and barons, duchesses and viscontessas, all still as stone.

"*How now, Ambassador?*"

Jean-François felt Nicolette stiffen as the Maiden's gaze fell upon her.

"Prince Kestrel." The Viscontessa dropped into a perfect curtsey, deeper than any mortal could manage. "Too long has it been since I beheld your splendor. I was sorely grieved at your noble father's murder, and regret deeply the nature of our parting."

"*Like a thief in the night.*" The Maiden's smile deepened, fangs glinting at the edges. "*Where be the prizes ye stole, little burglar? Snatched from my maker's grave?*"

Kestrel stared at the Viscontessa, black eyes burning.

"*Where be Gabriel de León?*"

"We should retire inside, Priori," the Empress cooed. "We have much to discuss."

"*Indeed. The state of thy defenses, for one. Where be thy men, Priori? Numbers far thinner than we were led to believe stand the watch of Sul Adair. Numbers of thy Court of Blood, thinner still. Unless … they all too be engaged in these … matters of state?*"

Kestrel turned back to Margot now, her glare gone fell.

"Where *be Gabriel de León?*"

Margot's lips were pursed, the Empress mute and motionless. Kestrel's gaze roamed the Chastain courtiers, falling at last on Jean-François, the pain of his wounds momentarily overshadowed by the fear in his belly. The historian shivered as he felt a cold touch brief upon his mind, the Maiden's fangs gleaming as she hissed.

“*Escaped.*”

“Ye dare.”

Margot did not seem to move. But in less than a blinking, she stood not upon her château’s steps, but a mere inch from Kestrel’s face. The Maiden’s hair moved *then,* sure and true, ruffled by the zephyr in the Empress’s wake.

“Ye *dare* press gifts ’pon mine own blood in mine own halls? Under banner of *pax* are we here convened! The hospitality of Blood Chastain shall not be besmirched, nor the Courtesy of their Empress aggrieved! Thy father should have taught thee better, Kestrel.”

The Iron Maiden’s gaze fell on the Empress again. And though Margot was her elder, her better, the last of the Five yet alive, Jean-François saw not fear in Kestrel, but *rage.*

“*My dread father did teach me. A great. Many. Things.*” Kestrel gestured to the windswept courtyard around them. “*And we stand not* in *thy halls, Margot.*”

The Maiden lifted her chin, glowering.

“*Nor, apparently, doth his murderer. Despite assurances made by Blood Chastain.*”

“Matters be in hand. Our finest hunters and the Dyvok both aready stalk his trail.”

“*Dyvok?”* Kestrel sneered. “*Their best already slaughtered by the prey they purport to hunt? Should they catch him, be their intent to* bleed *’pon the Lion ’til he drowns? Nay.*” The Maiden shook her head, snarling now. “*I say thee* nay, *Priori.*”

Turning swift, Kestrel leapt atop her weary horse with preternatural grace. The Voss knights formed up about the Maiden as her gaze fell again on Jean-François.

“*What direction hath our rabbit run, child?”*

The Marquis said nothing. But again, he felt that cold touch, crueler now, *harder,* icy claws rummaging through his memories until her treasure was unearthed.

“*West,*” she growled.

“Kestrel, we need him breathing,” Margot hissed. “A tale hath de León to tell, and—”

“*Scant hours his lead.*” The Maiden turned to her company. “*For blood, we ride.*”

“Nay, we need him *ALIVE*!”

Ignoring the Empress’s outrage, Kestrel wheeled her beast about. With a savage kick to the stallion’s flank, the Iron Maiden broke into a gallop, dark knights about her as they thundered back toward the gates.

“Damn her black soul to the *abyss*! If she slays him…” Margot snarled at a nearby thrall. “Gather every member of my court yet fit to hunt. We run!” Whirling upon her courtiers, the Empress roared. “*Run,* curse you!”

With dark glares and soft curses, the elders and mediae of Margot's court began stripping off their fine garments. Only fledglings too young to take the huntershape remained still, watching as brocade greatcoats and velvet gowns were cast aside, bodies stripped bare beneath the clouds. Dukes and contessas warped, twisted, joints cracking, spines arching, fur splitting porcelain skin. And in but a few beats of a mortal's heart, where once that Court of Chastain had stood, now awaited a pack of wolves, grim and deathless.

And one by one, they dashed after the Maiden.

A pale hand grasped Jean-François's arm, holding him with the strength of centuries. The Marquis gasped, bending double, whimpering as his Empress *squeezed.*

"My heart thou hast broken with thy failure, Jean-François. Were ye not mine own son, ashes and dust wouldst thou be. A *shame* I name thee. A lecherous, drool-flecked cur, more intent to drench his wick in mortal tallow than serve his mistress's will."

"I'm s-sorry," he whispered. "Forgive me, Mother, I—"

Her hand came down like thunder, a slap so swift and sharp it opened his cheek to the bone. Jean-François was sent sprawling, gasping, bleeding in the snow.

"Name me not thy mother, boy."

"Empress," he whispered, crawling now toward her. "Forgive m-me."

"Of forgiveness thou art unworthy, child, 'til thy sovereign's will is done. And while Margot and her court hunt for the quarry this bespawling doe-eyed *coxcomb* behind thee was still clever enough to catch, that will ye shall yet serve."

Behind Jean-François, Nicolette blinked—the Viscontessa uncertain if she was being insulted, yet clever enough not to seek clarification. Margot seized a fistful of those golden curls she so adored, wrenching the Marquis up to his knees as he cried out in pain.

"In her cell, the Liathe yet languishes. And I shall have the ending of her tale. Drag thy worthless carcass into the hole that I have hurled her, and wrest truth from her lips."

Margot released her grip, lip curled.

"If ye fail her again, may God help thee, Marquis. For thy Empress shall not."

Servants scuttled forth, unbinding stay and ribbon and button, releasing Margot from the prison of that elaborate gown. Naked, bloodless, the Empress of Wolves and Men stepped onto the cold snow, and with the arching of her spine, the sound of snapping greensticks and ripping skin, a great she-wolf now there stood. Her fur was ashen blond, streaked with grey, eyes red as heartsblood, gazing at her son in fury.

And with a snarl, she turned and ran after the Maiden, a blur across the snows.

The other fledglings of Margot's court drifted back inside, cold contempt in their eyes. But a pale hand reached for his, lifting him up from the snows, a little puff of fluff licking the blood from his split cheek.

"Are you well, uncle?" Nicolette asked.

"Well enough, sweet niece," he winced. "Merci."

"That was … unkind of Grandmama. I know she is the greatest of us. I know we owe this all to her. But between you and me, uncle, sometimes…"

The Viscontessa hugged her dog, scattering his brow with kisses.

"Well, sometimes she frightens me."

"You and me both, sweet niece."

The Marquis turned toward the château, but as he set foot upon the stair, the pain overcame him. Clutching his mangled nethers, the vampire staggered, caught silver swift by Nicolette. Placing little Henri upon the ground, his blood-niece slid her arm about him.

"Let me help you, uncle."

The Viscontessa led the Marquis back up the broad, snow-clad stairs, past bowing servants gathering armfuls of clothes, and into the vast cold maw of Sul Adair. Blowing a stray hair from her face, Nicolette glowered about the entrance hall.

"Where is that *bloody* Nordling I gave you? The one with the strapping cock?"

"I don't know…"

"Well then, what about your femmes? That Sūdhaemi slip, or your majordomo?"

"Young Jasminne was shared yestereve between our Empress and the Draigann. And when she learned the particulars of de León's escape, Mother was … upset. She could not take out her full measure of wrath upon me. I'm afraid poor Meline bore the brunt."

The historian swallowed, the sound of a tearing throat and a severed head striking stone ringing in his mind. Sightless eyes locked on his, wide and terrified.

"Poor thing," Nicolette mused. "I rather liked her. Lovely breasts."

"Twelve years she served me."

"Grandmama *has* been in a beastly mood of late."

"Heavy lies the head, Nicolette."

The Viscontessa blinked then, clearly baffled. Smiling, Jean-François patted her arm.

"Never mind. Come, lead me on."

The historian could only hobble at first, Nicolette taking most of his weight, but as they shuffled down the great frescoed halls, across oceans of blood-red carpet beneath high-flung gables hung with hundreds of bats, the historian eventually began limping under his own power, little Henri trotting at his heels.

“Is it true what they said?” Nicolette murmured.

“What did they say?”

“That the silversaint escaped while you were rutting with him?”

“As good an explanation as any, I suppose.”

“Oh, you absolute *beast*. How shameless of you, uncle, *really*.”

Scoffing in faux outrage, Nicolette slapped Jean-François’s backside, eliciting a hiss of pain. But his blood-niece slipped her arm about him again, fondly, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial hush.

“What was he like?”

Jean-François shook his head.

“Magnificent.”

Nicolette gave a delighted little titter, clutching his arm tighter. They’d reached that set of huge ironbound doors now, wrought with the likeness of the Angels of Death and Fear. A dozen hulking thrallswords in Chastain livery stood guard there; three times the previous tally. With a nod to the Marquis, they unbound the doors, that stair to the abyss waiting beyond. Nicolette swallowed, staring into the dark.

“You served as Mama’s ambassador to the Forever King’s court, oui?”

She blinked, attentions once more sharpened. “I did.”

“You were at the Battle of San Maximille. When the ’saint got his daughter back.”

“Oui. A pretty little monster, she was. Quite a glutton, between you and me. But … while I was present in the château, I did not truly *see* the battle, uncle. As I said, I’ve no stomach for all those screams and britches filled with dung.” Red lips curled in a wicked smile. “I prefer the feasting and fucking part of diplomacy. Like you.”

“What do you think Kestrel will do, should she catch the silversaint before Mother?”

“He murdered her father, uncle. She’ll tear his heart out through his teeth.”

The historian nodded. Nicolette looked into that dark doorway, the stairs beyond.

“I shall accompany you. Down there.” She swallowed. “If you wish.”

“No need. But it is very kind of you to offer, sweet niece.”

Nicolette smiled, kissing his cheek. “What is famille for?”

She left him then, gliding down grand frescoed halls, and the historian began the long limp down into the château bowels. The journey through that labyrinth had been a long one *before* the silversaint had incinerated his privates, but now, each step was agony, a dozen of his mother’s thralls trudging behind him, not a one offering to help. The pain was fitting punishment for his failure, he knew, and a part of him longed to return to the light of Margot’s favor. Yet his cheek still ached from where she’d struck him.

I just gave you forever, Jean-François. Use it wisely.

"… Dario?"

The Marquis stopped, staring down the corridor. At its end awaited those great stone doors, that silver chain, and strangely, his handsome young beau. The thrall started in fright, turning toward the historian and his company, hand pressed to his chest. But as he set eyes on Jean-François, an adoring smile at once curled his lips.

"Master," he sighed.

"What are you doing down here?"

"I knew the Empress would bid you take up the Liathe's tale, Master. Your history, fresh ink and quill, and a warm bottle await within. Just as you like it."

Jean-François limped down the corridor, stood now before the thrall. He studied the lad, long dark hair and deep dark eyes, pressing one hand to his cheek.

"What would I do without you, love?"

"I'm … sorry about Meline, Master. I know she served you long years." He took hold of Jean-François's hand, kissed his knuckles gently. "I only pray I serve you as faithfully."

"You're a good lad. You serve me well and true."

He blinked then, peering into the Nordling's eyes.

"Where did you say you were from?"

"You've never asked, Master." A shy smile curled his lips. "You've only just begun to call me by name, in truth. But I was born in Madeisa. A hunter's son."

"Viscontessa Nicolette said she found you on the road to Sūdhaem?"

"We fled. When food grew too scarce. I was grateful for the Viscontessa's rescue, but … more grateful when she gave me to *you*." Warm lips roamed his fingertips, teeth nipping soft as he breathed, "Can I come to you later? When the sun rises?"

Jean-François winced, the twinge of pain reminding him of the state of his nethers.

"Not today, love. I've work to do."

With a gesture, the historian bid the thrall step aside. The chain was already unlocked, and nodding to his mother's thugs, Jean-François set them to the doors. Those slabs of stone yawned wide, that deep, cold cave awaiting beyond. The historian saw the leather armchair waiting at the water's edge, the table set with a platter embossed with Chastain wolves and moons. A bottle of green glass sat beside a golden goblet, the brass-bound pages of his history, a chymical globe illuminating the darkness. And at the edge of that frail light, on the other side of those black waters, she awaited.

"You can stay outside, Capitaine. Come if I should call."

The lead thug saluted, cold blue eyes glinting beneath a scarred brow. “Apologies. But the Empress bid us accompany you at all times, Marquis.”

He scoffed at that, glancing to young Dario.

“Well, then. Let’s get this over with, shall we?”

The thralls marched in first, heavy tread all in time, burning torches in their fists. Jean-François followed slowly, eyes on the dark ahead. He could see her, uncoiling from the gloom like some serpent. And easing down into his armchair, trying not to wince as he crossed his legs, he met her ink-black eyes.

“Godmorrow, Mlle Castia.”

“Fairdawning, Marquis.”

Celene dropped into a flawless curtsey, red frockcoat whispering. Her face was pale in the gloom, bolts of long black hair framing her small but perfect smile.

“You look unwell.”

Jean-François lifted his tome from the table, placed it gingerly on his lap.

“I assure you, mademoiselle, I am in the best of health.”

“Count us relieved, then.”

Lifting the bottle, Dario filled his goblet, the scent of still-warm blood kissing the air. Celene shivered, parched tongue slipping across ashen lips. But her black gaze drifted to the thralls upon the shoreline, torches in hand. The stone beneath her feet was still slick with lamp oil, her coat and boots now stained.

“New faces, we see. What happened to Delphine and the others?”

Jean-François sipped the blood, cleared his throat. “The Battle of Augustin was done. The Forever King retreated in the face of young Dior’s transformation, your company safe. For the moment. But after you discovered Oleander the Wise had been slain by Empress Isabella, and the Redeemer’s Blade given to your *accursed* brother, what happened next?”

“Accursed?”

Celene tilted her head at his tone, smile gone sly.

“Has my dear Gabriel been misbehaving?”

The goblet *sang* as it struck stone, hurled from his trembling hand. Blood sprayed as the historian slapped the pages of his tome, half rising from his chair with a snarl.

“Your *dear Gabriel* left you down here to *die*. And if you’ve a wish to, by all means, let your tongue continue to roam unchecked! The cold lies heavy on my bones this night, Mlle Castia, and little would please me more than to warm myself over your *ashes*!”

“He betrayed you, too.”

Her smile faded then, a hint of sorrow in the blacks of her eyes.

“He’s good at that, isn’t he?”

Jean-François took a handful of heartbeats to calm his temper, smoothing the silk of his cravat. A white moth was circling about the chymical globe and he batted it aside, reaching for the bottle and pressing it to his lips. The blood was warm enough to banish his rage, to wash the edge off his pain. He swallowed, shivering, comforted to know pleasure could yet be found in the simplest of things.

Lowering the bottle and licking his lips, he sighed.

"He's *very* good at it."

"Now perhaps you understand why we hate him, Marquis."

He lifted his gaze, found the Liathe's eyes fixed upon the bottle.

"Would you like a drink?" he heard himself ask.

Celene swallowed then, barely suppressing a shiver.

"We'd not say no."

The glass gleamed, flung across the babbling gulf between them. The Last Liathe's hand moved swift, snatching the bottle from the air. Shaking, *groaning,* she pressed it to her lips, Jean-François watching the motion of her throat as she swallowed, long and thick.

"You've still not told me what became of your wounds, mademoiselle. How exactly the ravages of your murder were lifted from your skin."

Celene lowered the bottle, head thrown back as she shivered. For an age she sat, face upturned to the heavens, lashes fluttering upon her cheeks. But finally she lowered her chin, fixed him with those bottomless eyes.

And she smiled.

"Patience, coldblood."

II

CLOSER TO GOD

“SEVEN WEEKS HAD passed since the Battle of Augustin—days that beleaguered city had never expected to see. Seven weeks in which crushed battlements were repaired, dead sons and daughters buried, fresh soldiers trained. Seven weeks of celebration of our victory over the Endless Legion, and she who’d made it possible. But in that time, grey snows had begun falling from dark skies, the River Béni slowly freezing, winter creeping back to Elidaen.

“All of us knew who would return with it.

“It was prièdi, and mass was being held in Cathédrale de Lumière. We could not attend, of course—of all churches in Elidaen, that ground might have been the holiest, and besides, the Dead were not left to roam Augustin freely. Mother Maryn and I were being kept as ‘guests’ in the western wing of Château Impérial, under the watchful eyes of a small *legion* of Inquisitorial troops. But we stood at a high window that day, marveling at the scene below: tens of thousands of Augustin’s citizens gathered in the cold, snow-clad square of Rive Cœur, before the greatest house of God ever built.

“That cathedral was a *marvel,* Marquis. Even denied the splendor of its interior, we could not help but feel closer to God simply looking at it. It rose up across the grand plaza in Augustin’s heart—master of the eastern flank, with Château Impérial on the west. It was the opus of the genius Albrecht; every spire and flying buttress a hymn to heaven. Its foundations were stone, but the intent of its designer was to admit as much of God’s light as could be managed. And thus, for the most part, Cathédrale de Lumière was a miracle wrought not of stone, but *glass*.

“Vast windows depicting scenes from the Testaments were stained every color of the rainbow, held up by a beautiful latticework of solid goldglass. Mined from the mountain ranges around Lashaame and Raa, it was the rarest and most valuable material in the empire, usually reserved for objets d’art in the houses of the highest. But in their capital, the Augustin Emperors had assembled such a sum as to beggar belief, used to fashion a house worthy of the Almighty himself. The figures within were blurred even to our Dead eyes, but through the panes, we could make out a tiny figure in white; the Pontifex himself, conducting the mass. As always, the imperial court was assembled, and though we could not see them, we knew Dior and Reyne sat among them.

“Grand estate buildings framed the crowded square, and in its heart loomed a statue of Maximille, the Seventh Martyr, first Emperor of Elidaen, and patriarch of House Augustin. He was carved of white marble, a longblade in his upraised fist and a wheel about his neck. Fifty feet high he loomed upon a rearing unicorn, guardian of the city his children had built. About his feet were great fountains, fashioned like a flock of cherubim. Waters rushed from vases in their hands, filling a vast pool about the statue’s base and, from there, flowing outward—this single fountain was the source of those five great canals running through the streets of Rive Cœur.

“We stood at the window, listening to distant hymns on the rising wind. We were clad in new clothes, provided at the command of Empress Isabella herself. Fine leathers, silken shirt, a *wondrous* frockcoat of crimson, adorned with buttons of pure gold. But best of all, a scarf of red silk and a mask of new porcelain covered our face and throat, repainted by our own hand. Black-rimmed eyes and a sawtooth smile, near as awful as our own true grin.

“‘Why did Voss abandon his attack?’

“For weeks had I asked myself that question, and for all my quiet wondering, it was yet unanswered. Glancing to the small figure at our side, we finally spoke it aloud.

“‘Why did Fabién retreat, when he was so close to victory?’

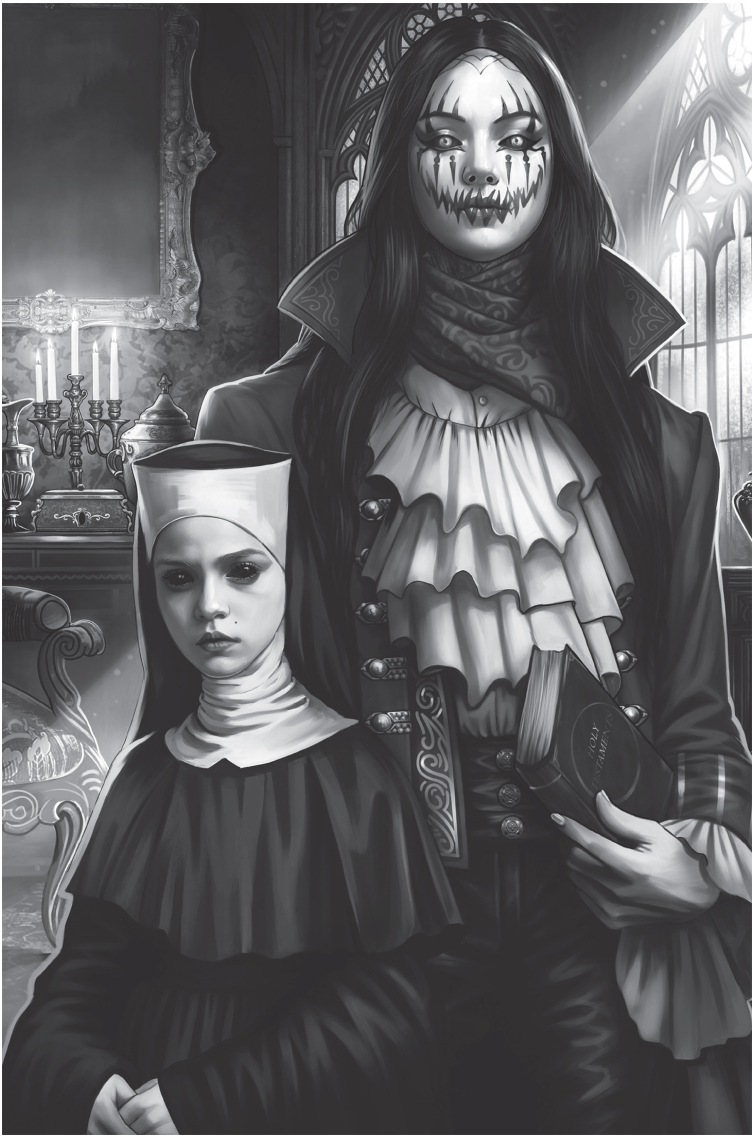
“Mother Maryn remained silent, eyes fixed on that cathedral, fingers entwined. After we’d raided the wardrobes at Maergenn, it had been strange to dress a creature so ancient in the clothes of a young girl, but we wondered now if we didn’t prefer Maryn’s former attire. Our Priori was clad in new cloth just as we, fashioned by request from the imperial seamstresses—the severe black robes and dove-white wimple of a holy prioress, wrapped about the body of child with eyes of ebony.

“*Mother* Maryn indeed.

“‘Priori?’ we whispered.

“Maryn bowed her head and made the sign of the wheel, murmuring an end to her prayer. And finally, she turned those bottomless black eyes on me.

“‘*Wise thou art to ask, Liathe. We have pondered such ourselves these last weeks.*’



“‘Have you found an answer that satisfies? To us, it makes no sense.’

“‘*Our arrival surely played a role. After his crusade at Charbourg, Fabién thought our Faith extinguished. For centuries did he labor to destroy Illia’s dream, and dismay he must have surely felt to know he failed.*’

“‘But if the Maiden pressed with the numbers she had, she might have destroyed us then and there. And yet, her father bid her retreat. Why?’

“‘*Dior, wethinks. The revelation that she is Fiáin dahtr as well as heaven’s heir was not foreseen, even by Voss. If Kestrel had pressed, who can know if Dior might have been hurt? Even slain? Fabién knows the prophecy. He knows he has until Maidsfeast to stop us. He is nothing if not patient, and* ever *hath he sought to take the Grail alive.*’

“We shook our head at that; one more question that gnawed us constantly.

“‘And still we do not know *why*.’

“‘*Why matters not, Liathe. He will* never *have her.*’ Maryn looked to the skies, gentle flakes of frozen grey kissing the window. ‘*Concern thyself not with the Voss. Winter is come once more, and Fabién shall soon return in force. All thought, all will must now be bent to seeing Dior ascend the throne.*’

“We nodded, eyes on the stormwashed heavens above. We still believed in the prophecy—after all we’d seen Dior do, our faith in the Grail of San Michon was stronger than ever. And we still clung desperately to the idea that in fulfilling his son’s dream, in uniting heaven and earth as one, God would judge our souls righteous.

“‘What news of Phoebe?’

“‘*Her journey hath been fraught. Foulbloods roam the lands unchecked. But she be within sight of San Maximille at last. The Sainted Blade shall soon be ours.*’

“‘One step nearer to salvation.’

“Maryn shook her head. ‘*And still, ten thousand leagues away. Dior hath not even* broached *subject of her ascension to the throne with Empress Isabella.*’

“We sighed then, head hung low.

“‘She has tried. Isabella’s priority has been the repair of her fortifications, replenishing her troops. They attend mass together, but the Grail is never given opportunity to speak to Isabella alone. We suspect the Empress does not entirely trust Dior. Or us.’ We licked our ruined lips, voice gone soft. ‘And Dior has her own troubles. The notion of being a duskdancer would be difficult enough for her to contend with. And since learning of her lineage, matters between her and Reyne have been … strained, as you can imagine.’

“‘*What I can better imagine are the fires that await us should we fail,*’ Maryn hissed. ‘*No time hath we for juvenile melodrama. Seven* weeks *hath passed since we arrived, and no longer is it enough for the Grail to* try. *The first banners hath arrived from the southern provinces with fresh troops, and the Empress holds feast tonight to welcome her lords.*’

“‘… You wish Dior to broach the topic in public?’

“‘*If she cannot speak to Isabella alone, what choice have we? Would that we could simply bend the wills of those around the Grail and be done. But every cup Isabella and her household drink from is purest silver, and every member of Dior’s entourage who hath supped of her blood is now immune to thralldom.*’

“We blinked at that. Wulfric had kept thralls—those hunters who roamed the countryside looking for signs of the Grail had all been bound to him. But …

“‘You have … tried to slave members of her company?’

“‘*Stay thy histrionics, Liathe. Those who do the will of the Almighty be freer than any under heaven. And there be no room for sin in a heart filled with the fire of God.*’ Maryn pursed her lips, thoughtful. ‘*Yet even without the Blood, there be other ways we can exert influence. And thou art one of them.*’

“‘… Me?’

“‘*Dior trusts thee, Liathe. She is* fond *of thee. Wheels hath been set in motion. When Dior comes to thee for counsel, thou shalt steer her* only *in the direction of the throne.*’

“‘Wheels, what d—’

“‘*Thou art a faithful and true servant of God, child. We see the devotion in thee, fierce as heaven’s fire. We wonder if Wulfric knew how bright thy faith would burn when he took thee in. We wonder if* that *is why he chose thee to succeed him.*’

“A sliver of ice pierced our belly then, eyes like black glass boring into ours.

“‘*Know we, Celene, what thou didst to him.*’

“Our jaw tightened behind our mask, sudden terror gripping our veins as the very snow falling outside seemed to still. We knew it’d been foolish to hope we might keep our sin from a mind as powerful as the Mother’s. But now our secret was unveiled, we feared the worst, nails biting bloody into our palms. Yet rather than attacking us as she’d done beneath Dún Maergenn, Maryn took hold our hands, gentle as feathers.

“‘*Be at peace. Thou hast not destroyed our brother, but* saved *him. Wulfric was ever a delicate flower, Celene. Of we four who survived the Charbourg’s fall, he was the youngest. The most … human.*’

“‘He was a monster,’ we hissed.

“‘*He was. But evil we do.*’

“‘… Lest evil we be.’

“‘*We are* all *of us monsters, Liathe. Such be the Almighty’s design, and to that, thou hast cleaved true. Who was it who found Dior in the wilderness? Who was it that brought her through hellfire and war? Who was it who burned, bled,* believed *in this moment more than any other?* ’ She squeezed my hands, gaze locked on mine. ‘*It was* thee*, Celene. All thou hast given and suffered, every sin committed, every drop of blood spilled has led to this moment. Our moment of redemption! And in felling thy mentor, thou hast proved thyself his worthy heir. Capable of doing all that which must be done.*’

“Maryn shook her head then, black eyes shining with adoration and wonder.

“‘*I walked with the first of us. The greatest of our Faith. And I vow it true, child: great Illia herself would have been proud of thee.*’

“My fear faded, replaced with the elation of her praise, the acknowledgment of all we’d given and lost. For months we’d dreaded Maryn uncovering our crime. I’d been Wulfric’s sworn disciple, and my betrayal, no matter how well deserved, had been a terrible one. But rather than punishment, it had earned me … accolade.

“*‘Thou art ruthless, Liathe. Pitiless. Dauntless. And know thee, better than any in this city save perhaps ourselves, the stakes at risk in this contest.’*

“‘Every soul under heaven.’

“*‘Just so.’*

“‘We will save them, Mother. We will save them all.’

“*‘So we pray. Not long now, God willing. More than eight centuries hath we born this burden, child. Trapped in this … body. This …* life.’

“We blinked, taken a touch aback. For all our time together, Maryn had spoken mostly of the Faith, and almost nothing of herself. But we could hear such desolation and exhaustion in her voice now, we thought for a moment she might weep.

“‘It could not have been easy for you,’ we murmured.

“*‘Nay.’*

“Maryn looked down at her little hands and sighed.

“*‘Once we were naught but rage, Celene. Boiling our soul to blackness and our purpose to nothingness. Canst thou imagine it? The fury? The impotence? A woman of twenty, fifty, eighty, imprisoned in this child’s flesh? Forever small? Forever unwanted, save for the lust of deviants and the devouring maws of childless mothers? ’* She shook her head. ‘*Naught but faith in God could have sustained us. The same which sustained thee. We are kin, thee and I. Alike not simply in mind, but soul. And not at this last breath shall we stumble. We are close to* salvation, *Celene. So very close. Can we count ’pon thee, in darkest hour to come, to do what must be done? ’*

“We squeezed her little hands then, the fire of faith ablaze in our Dead heart.

“‘Of *course* you can, Mother.’

“*‘Véris, child.’* She smiled, deep as forever. ‘*Keep the faith. Judgment Comes.’*

“We remembered Wulfric hissing those words at us. Blood in our mouth, on our hands, seeping from our broken heart. But as if in answer to those dark thoughts, a song split the stormwashed skies—a symphony of bells from goldglass spires to signal the end of mass. A cry went up across the square, the folk there shifting forward, straining to see past the legions of guards about the cathedral steps. The great doors were flung wide, all within the square poised on knife’s edge. And out in the mob, a lone child cried.

“*‘The Grail! ’*

“Dior stepped from Cathédrale de Lumière, stood at the top of the grand stair. She was resplendent in a beautiful gown, white as yesteryear snows. Ashen hair tumbled free upon her shoulders in the fashion of a maid, body bereft of jewelry save a single wheel of gold about her neck. The Princess á Maergenn and Joaquin Marenn stood beside her, Reyne draped in the emerald green and wolves of her house, the houndboy looking handsome as a pocketful of devils in dark new finery. And at Dior's other side stood Empress Isabella, swathed in imperial gold, presenting the Grail with a wave of her hand.

"'The Savior of Augustin!'

"'God be praised!' came the cry. 'Bless you, child!'

"'Heaven's Huntress!'

"'La demoiselle du Graal!'

"They loved her, one and all, devotion writ in every smile, and well we knew why. After the Battle of Augustin, the whole city had been rife with rumor about her; the she-wolf who severed the hand of the Iron Maiden, the Redeemer—oui, *Redeemer* they named her, Marquis—who delivered their city from doom. But for weeks after the Forever King's retreat, Dior had roamed the streets with her Unbound, working dawn 'til dusk.

"The desolation in Rive Nord and Sud had been terrible, the toll upon its people even heavier. And though each night we could see how much it cost—her skin waxen and shadows cut beneath her eyes—still she'd bled for them, just as she'd bled on that dock for the victims of the Battle of Maergenn. When she'd arrived in Augustin, Dior had been the girl who turned back the Endless Legion. But now, its citizens saw her as she who had healed the mauled and maimed. Mended the battered and broken.

"Not destruction, but salvation.

"Not an ending, but a beginning.

"Dior raised her mangled left hand, and we watched awestruck as the entire city followed suit, arms held up, forefingers and thumbs outstretched. An *ocean* of people, united in adulation for she who had delivered them from evil.

"*'They adore her,'* Maryn whispered. '*And well they should. Soon, Heaven's Scion shall deliver them all from the grim hand of darkness.*'

"We bowed our head, praying that it would be so. We knew we were yet far from salvation—the Redeemer's blade still in the hands of our wretched brother, Dior's ascension to the throne nothing close to assured. But at the sight of those folk united in their adoration, I could not help but be buoyed up, looking to the strangled sun, knowing in our souls salvation must soon come.

"'This blackened veil will be undone.'"

III

THE PRICE

"WHAT IS A good term for inebriation, Marquis?"

Jean-François blinked, glancing up from his tome.

"A *good* term? Is there something wrong with *inebriation*?"

"For our purposes, it lacks a certain … je ne sais quoi."

The Last Liathe took another mouthful from the bottle he'd given her, dragging her knuckles across her lips and blinking. The historian raised one brow.

"I should have warned you, Mlle Castia. I often have my thralls drink a bottle of wine before they bleed for me. Gives the blood a little kick. I fear it might've gone to your head."

"Oh." Celene squinted at the mostly empty bottle. "*Oh.*"

"Have you ever been drunk before?"

"Once. It was … not my finest hour."

The historian watched as the most dangerous murderess in all the empire peered at her outstretched hands as if they belonged to someone else. And despite himself, he laughed. "I believe the term you're searching for is *shitfaced,* mademoiselle."

Celene shook her head. "Too vulgar."

"*Rat-arsed,* perhaps?"

"How, precisely, is that *less* vulgar than shitfaced?"

"*Soused*? *Rotten*? *Jagged*? *Pickled*? *Full as a tick*? *Drunk as a lord*? *Off one's tits*?"

The Last Liathe snapped her fingers. Pointing to Jean-François, she nodded.

"That one. Perfect."

She pushed the bottle away with her boot, scowling.

"Dior was a touch off her tits."

The historian scoffed and turned to a new page as Celene rejoined her tale.

"The banquet that night had started well enough. It was held in the grandest hall any of us had ever seen. Once again the walls were gold, refracting the light of what must've been a thousand chymical globes suspended in goldglass chandeliers overhead. A sextet of master soothsingers from the Opus Grande played upon a mezzanine, and the air was bright with talk and laughter and beautiful song. Five great tables were draped in red velvet, decorated with golden statuary and hollanfel vines. A sixth ran horizontal to the others, set aside for the royal famille and their entourage.

"Vassals of the Empress had arrived in Augustin with fresh troops, called from across Elidaen's southern reaches. Every noble house of the city was invited to greet them, and every invitation accepted—all wishing to catch a glimpse of the girl who had bitten off the right hand of the Iron Maiden, cured the sick and dying, and made the entire populace of Augustin fall hopelessly, completely in love with her.

"*La demoiselle du Graal.*

"Mother Maryn and I were not in attendance—fonts of holy water stood at every door, every utensil in sight was silver. Besides, it would not *do* to have corpses sit with quality. But Dior was given a place of honor at the table below the Empress, her capitaines beside her: Joaquin Marenn, resplendent in a dark doublet with split crimson sleeves, and Reyne á Maergenn, Princess of Lands Low and High, bedecked in an off-shoulder gown of emerald green. Several Unbound were also present; those Callums and Sherrods and Liams never far from Dior's side. But the crude tabards scrawled with her sigil had been replaced with cloth of finest cut, her sigil not wrought with chalk now, but silver thread.

"Dior herself wore a beautiful but austere dress of pale satin. Her ashen curls were let loose, long enough to flow past her shoulders, our moth hid beneath them. Her only adornment was that golden wheel, strung above her well-hid décolletage. All told, she was a picture of chaste and holy virtue, and about as comfortable with that pose as you imagine.

"'More wine.'

"Such had been the refrain for an hour, and the pageboy attending her looked distinctly dubious as the Grail waved her goblet under his nose. It was wrought of gold—unlike every other guest in attendance, Dior could not drink from silver. Reyne and Joaquin shared a troubled glance as the young lad filled it up again.

"'Are you certain you should be—'

"'More for her, too,' Dior said, nodding to Reyne's cup.

"Joaquin cleared his throat. 'Dior, I'm not much one for royal banquets, but if I were to guess, passing out in a puddle of your own vomit isn't exactly fashionable.'

"'Bring him a *whole* carafe,' Dior said, glancing at the pageboy.

"'I know you're nervous,' Reyne whispered. 'I know Maryn and Celene have been pressing you to speak to the Empress. But I'm not certain getting stumbling drunk right before you inform Isabella you need her *throne* is the wisest plan.'

"'Why the hell do you think I'm drinking?' Dior knocked back her cup, glanced toward the high table. 'I'm trying to conjure the balls to ask her, Reyne. Gabe always said there's nothing like a dram of courage to hold you steady when the screaming starts.'

"The Grail looked down into her goblet and sighed from the bottom of her chest.

"'*God,* I wish he was here.'

"'Phoebe will return soon,' Reyne said. 'Gabriel beside her, I'm s—'

"'Are you well, Mlle Lachance?'

"The question came from the royal table, rising just high enough to be heard above the chatter and minstrelsong. Glancing to the dais, Dior found herself looking into the cold sapphire eyes of Philippe de Augustin. The handsome young prince was dressed in a doublet of golden velvet, embroidered with the unicorns and swords of his house. He sat at his mother's right hand, but to Isabella's left, the high seat of the Emperor was, as always, empty.

"'I'm wonderful, Majesty.' Dior held out her cup again. 'Merci for asking.'

"Philippe watched the pageboy fetch another carafe and pour. Unlike much of the citizenry, the young Prince had proved largely immune to the holy fervor surrounding the Grail. Though she performed miracles, Dior also kept company with duskdancers and vampires, and the Prince had little regard for either. But more, Dior represented a fundamental shift in power at court, and if there is one breed under heaven who resent shifts in power, it is those who are *already* powerful.

"'You are enjoying our feast?' the Prince asked.

"'It's delicious, merci. I've not had much opportunity to drink real wine before.'

"'It comes in barrels, if you prefer.'

"Dior ignored the jab and threw a thoughtful glance to Joaquin. 'Perhaps a bucket? Might come in handy later when I'm being *unfashionable*.'

"'I look forward to the show,' Philippe replied, lip curled. 'I wonder if—'

"'How fares your quest, Mlle Lachance?'

"The minstrels played on, but some of the nearby chatter stilled as

Empress Isabella interrupted her son, nobles and clergy now leaning nearer and straining to overhear.

"'Quest, Your Grace?' Dior replied.

"Isabella smiled. 'The Sainted Blade.'

"Dior gulped another mouthful, stalling for thought. Truth told, the *quest* was something of a sore spot. When Maryn had informed her that after months of searching, she'd finally discovered the Black Lion marching with his army toward San Maximille, Dior had been overjoyed. But when she'd asked our Priori to inform my brother she lived, Maryn had proved … reluctant. The Mother raised an excellent point—Gabriel did not even *know* her, and had no reason to believe anything she said. It was deemed far more sensible to send someone he trusted to speak with him in the flesh. But not only did that mean leaving Gabriel in the dark, it also robbed Dior of another of her dearest counselors.

"Dior wasn't simply the Holy Grail of San Michon, she was also a duskdancer of the Moonsthrone. And with Phoebe gone after my brother, she had no one to *talk* to about it.

"Fear for Gabriel, troubles with Reyne, questions about her very nature all weighed on her mind. Not to mention the task of sweet-talking her way onto the throne of Elidaen.

"No wonder she was drinking.

"But Dior sat straighter, breathing deep as she met the Empress's eyes. 'Phoebe is on her way to Gabriel's side, Your Grace. I'm told she'll be with him any day now.'

"The Prince sipped his wine, scowling. 'Long did Baron Gerrard de León ignore our royal father's requests for aid. I find it … *interesting* his bastard grandson has mustered so great a host to our defense.'

"'Not exactly *your* defense, Majesty,' Dior replied. 'Maryn thinks that Gabe plans to attack the Forever King at San Maximille. But fear not. Phoebe will talk him around. Bring him and his army and Ashdrinker all back to Augustin. I'm sure of it.'

"Isabella lifted her goblet, the wine barely wetting her lips.

"'We have taken long counsel with our generals, our soothsayers, our clergy these past nights, Mlle Lachance. As you can imagine, there is much conjecture as to the veracity of your tale. Yet our royal son and chief archivists have found some *small* traces of what might constitute substantiation in the Royal Athenaeum. Words about a secret bloodline of the Dead. A hidden war. A prophecy born of the crusade at Charbourg.'

"'Forgive me, Your Grace. But you mean to say the *heresy* at Charbourg.'

"It was an elderly man speaking, sat to the left of the Emperor's empty chair. He was a portly fellow in dove-white robes, a silver wheel about his throat, silver rings on his fingers. His beard was long and grey, his balding head gleaming in the candlelight.

"'Of course, Pontifex Gascoigne,' Isabella smiled. 'The heresy, forgive me.'

"'Justly were those rebels who rose against House Augustin put down.' Rheumy eyes fell on Dior. 'And well were their claims of the Redeemer's mortal line silenced.'

"Prince Philippe lifted his goblet and muttered, 'That would certainly explain an almost complete absence of their mention in the royal archives, at least.'

"'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, Majesty,' the Pontifex said, tucking into his third helping of mushroom stew. 'Would you not agree, High Inquisitrix Maya?'

"The old man glanced to the elderly woman beside him. Despite the opulent surrounds, the High Inquisitrix was dressed in simple black leathers, a blood-red tabard embroidered with the Angel Naél's flower and flail, a black gauntlet on her right hand. Her food was untouched, goblet filled with water. Though her troops had taken no direct action about it, as far as we knew, the death warrant issued for Gabriel and Dior had yet to be rescinded by the Tower of Tears. The Inquisitrix's reply was soft as pipe smoke.

"'A *very* dangerous thing, Pontifex Gascoigne.'

"'Still,' Isabella smiled. 'When in a storm, the wise woman prays to God, yet rows for shore. In the coming battle, we should use every advantage we have, oui?'

"Prince Philippe nodded. 'The Corpse King has retreated to San Maximille, but he *will* return come the frost. With the troops House de León has mustered, we can meet Voss with a force to be reckoned with. But if we could bring back the sun…'

"'Is it wise to put such stock in promises of the Dead, Majesty?' the Inquisitrix asked. 'Do you truly believe the Lord God would entrust our fate to corpses and children?'

"If all on earth is the Lord's plan, then Mlle Lachance's coming must also be his holy design,' the Empress said. 'All Augustin has witnessed her power, good Inquisitrix. It cannot be doubted such gifts come from the Almighty himself. If our only requirement to bring back the sun is to unite her with the Redeemer's blade, that seems a cheap price to pay, no?'

"'Your Grace…'

"Dior cleared her throat, glancing to Reyne.

"'I … I fear the price might not be so cheap as all that.'

"Isabella tilted her head. 'Indeed?'

"The Grail drew a long breath, as if before the deepest plunge. Reyne squeezed her hand, Joaquin watching with faith undimmed. And meeting the Empress's eyes, she spoke.

"'The Esana Prophecy says I have to be united with the sword my forebear used to try and unify all Elidaen. But to bring the sun back…'

"Dior snatched up her goblet and took a long gulp.

“Isabella’s brow rose ever so slight.

“‘I have to sit the Fivefold Throne he sought to build. On the day of Maidsfeast, a few months from now…’ The Grail looked to the Empress, eyes filled with childish hope. ‘… I must be crowned Empress of all Elidaen.’

“All chatter stilled, all whispers stopped, even the soothsingers ceased their playing. Empress Isabella sat motionless, Prince Philippe looked incredulous, Reyne snatched up her own goblet and downed it with a single swallow. A silence, vast and complete, fell over the hall, broken at last by smothered chuckling.

“It was the Pontifex, red-faced, mid-mouthful, trying unsuccessfully to stifle his laughter with his kerchief. Eventually the old man abandoned his attempt, falling into a fit somewhere between coughing and guffawing. Beside him, the dour High Inquisitrix softly scoffed, and nobles around the high table soon joined in, the quiet replaced by peals of laughter more dreadful still.

“‘Y-you?’ Gascoigne managed to wheeze. ‘*Empress?* ’

“‘I’ve thought about it!’ Dior declared, shouting above the guffaws. ‘It doesn’t have to be forever! The prophecy says I need to sit the Fivefold Throne, but not that I have to *keep* it! So you just crown me at Maidsfeast, and next day I can give it right back!’

“‘Impressive,’ Inquisitrix Maya sneered. ‘An apostate *and* a traitor.’

“Joaquin rose to his feet, glowering as he slammed a fist upon the table. ‘Dior Lachance is no traitor. And I’ll suffer none to name her such, madame.’

“‘You threaten violence in these halls, boy?’ the Prince asked.

“‘I *threaten* nothing, Highness,’ Joaquin growled.

“The gathering was in soft uproar now, laughter dissolving into a gabble of whispers as folk began to realize the Grail might actually be serious. Dior pulled Joaquin back down to his seat as Philippe looked to Isabella, absolutely exasperated.

“‘Mother, this is outrageous. How long do you intend to entertain this madn—’

“Isabella raised her hand, not deigning to look at her son. And though *clearly* displeased at being once more silenced, the heir to the empire bit his tongue.

“‘You will forgive our son his manners, Mlle Lachance. Some folk insist on talking, even when they know not what they talk *about*.’

“The point was well taken, and in a few moments, all chatter had ended, quiet descending upon the banquet hall once more. With a meaningful glance to the mezzanine, the Empress set the soothsingers playing again.

“‘You and Gabriel de León must have gotten on famously, Mlle Lachance. Neither one of you are exactly creatures of subtlety, are you?’

“‘Your Grace, *please* believe me. I don’t want the throne, I just want this all to end!’

"'And in this, sweet child, you stand not alone. Elidaen's people are my children all, and there is nothing I'd not give to see the sun rise true and bright for them once more. But what you ask is … *ludicrous*. A descendant of Maximille the Martyr has ruled this empire since it was forged. And though your gifts be undisputed, our gratitude for your deliverance of our city unmeasured, you are…'

"'A blasphemer,' the Pontifex sneered.

"'A murderer,' the Prince added.

"The Inquisitrix nodded. 'And a whorechild.'

"Isabella's glance brought silence. But her eyes were sad as they returned to Dior.

"'These are desperate times. But the crowning of a monarch is a holy act, conducted by the head of the Almighty's church, not before a court, but a *congregation*. The Serment Impérial is sworn before God and Mothermaid and all the angels of the heavenly host. I am no emperor. But were he here, my husband would surely counsel as I; that the Fivefold Throne of Augustin is no taverne stool whereupon the crown of empire might be shuffled back and forth like a grain of corn in a game of guess-a-cup.'"

Deep in the bowels of Sul Adair, Jean-François turned his page and chuckled.

"Our good Mlle du Graal was hardly the most adept of politicians, was she?"

"No," Celene replied. "But up 'til then, she'd no real need to be. Dior began life as a grifter. A thief. She had become a battle-blooded leader, able to inspire the masses with the wave of one bloodied hand, oui. But truth told, though she had a sly, gutterborn sort of cunning, she was no courtier. No stateswoman. And as Isabella stared her down, cold and imperious, it became clear just how out of her depth Dior was here.

"'Your Grace?'

"Isabella's eyes shifted.

"'Princess á Maergenn.'

"'Forgive me,' Reyne said, curtseying with perfect form. 'In your ineffable wisdom, I am certain you have already considered this—'

"'Flattery is wealthless woman's comfort, Princess. We've no need of fool's gold.'

"Reyne lowered her mismatched gaze, carefully shifting her tone. 'Forgive me again, then, Your Grace. But I think I might see a solution to our dilemma.'

"'Speak, then. But pray, give our good Pontifex a moment to swallow, lest he choke.'

"The old man was back into his meal, dabbing at his beard with a napkin and murmuring apologies. All ears were now bent toward the Princess as she lifted her chin. Reyne stood tall, proud; a daughter of the Ossway, yet raised among these nobleborn serpents and well versed in the music they swayed to.

“‘My knowledge of prophecy is imperfect. But from what Maryn told us, daysdeath will end when a descendant of the Redeemer sits as ruler of this realm. Yet a ruler need not sit the Fivefold Throne itself. Emperors and *Empresses* rule side by side. If that Empress were wed to an Emperor of Maximille’s line, House Augustin’s rule could continue unabated. And more…’ Reyne swallowed, glancing for but one heartbeat to Dior, ‘… the fruit of such a union would be of Augustin and the Redeemer’s blood entwined.’

“The hall was gone silent again now, the light of realization dawning in the eyes of the clergy, the nobility, the Prince, but most, Dior herself. Her eyes were wide, voice cracking as she whispered.

“‘Reyne…’

“‘You say there is nothing you’d not give to see the sun rise true and bright on your people once more, Your Grace,’ the Princess said. ‘And I for one would cut the tongue from the head of any man who named you liar. The Forever King will return come wintersdeep, but with daylight on our side, this war ends *amorrow*. So it seems the price for victory over the Dead, while the steepest sort, need only be paid by one of us in this hall.’

“Mismatched eyes fell again on Dior, brimming now with tears.

“‘Perhaps a few of us.’

“Reyne clenched her jaw then, steeling her resolve.

“‘Wed your son to the Holy Grail, Your Grace. Unite the lines of Augustin and the Redeemer, the rule of heaven and earth made one. Bring back the sun to our sky, and the hope to our hearts. Give your crown to your firstborn son, and his hand to heaven’s daughter, and your name to the pages of history as she who saved this empire entire.’

“‘Mother—’

“‘Oh *hush,* Philippe.’

“The Prince scowled, cheeks pinked with fury. Isabella was motionless, eyes shining like cut jewels. Her Pontifex and Inquisitrix were both unmoved, firm in their convictions about these blasphemies. But around us, in the minds of every marquis and count and baron, we felt a tremor now.

“A *whisper*.

“All had seen the holy work of Dior’s hand, after all. The sick made well. The city saved. The Forever King himself fled before her divine wrath. And looking upon her now, clad in dove white and gold by Isabella’s own hand, Dior Lachance looked every inch a holy child of heaven. A fitting bride for Augustin’s brave young prince. Their union would guarantee continuance of Maximille the Martyr’s bloodline, united with that of the Almighty himself. And as the courtiers of the Golden Halls began to whisper among themselves again, one point had now been made abundantly clear by the Princess á

Maergenn.

“A single crown for the return of the sun was a cheap price to pay indeed.

“Reyne wiped at tear-stung lashes and slowly took her seat. Dior rose wordlessly and stumbled toward the exit. And Philippe, firstborn son of Alexandre III, looked to his mama with a question in his eyes.”

Jean-François clucked his tongue, shaking his head as he dipped his quill.

“Now *that* is a politician.”

IV

NEW EYES

"'WHY DID YOU do that?'

"They stood in Dior's bedchamber afterward, alone but not alone. The room was well appointed, all gold and velvet and mahogany. Flames danced in a great hearth, refracting on carafes of wine and crystal goblets on the mantel, its heat setting our tiny wings ashiver. Reyne sat in a plush velvet chair, mismatched eyes locked on the Grail. Dior was pacing in front of that fire, voice cracking with outrage as she turned on the princess.

"'Why the *hell* did you do that, Reyne?'

"'Do what exactly?'

"'You know what I mean, don't act a fool! Why did you joust with Isabella like that?'

"The Princess pursed her lips, sighing as she looked into the flames.

"'I grew up in this court, remember? I know how these people think, Dior. If we'd proposed marriage to Philippe in private, *that's* where the idea would've died. But now, that question lives in the minds of every general, every lord, every power broker in this city. Isabella married into the dynasty. She's a female sovereign, widowed onto the throne, and Augustin in name only. You couldn't throw a rock in that room without hitting a man who wouldn't trade her for Philippe. A *male* heir of *Augustin* blood.'

"'And why didn't you talk to me about it first?'

"'What would you have said?'

"Dior glowered, ice-blue eyes turned molten by the light of those flames.

‘About being sold off like some cow to that poncy little shit?’

“‘Prince Philippe is a good man. A brave warrior. His men adore him.’

“‘I don’t know what makes me feel more sick. The idea of our *union,* or listening to you talk about the *fruit* of it in front of a room full of drooling toff wankers!’

“‘The Augustin dynasty has survived six centuries, Dior. There’s nothing more important to them than the idea of succession.’ Reyne rose to her feet now, anger shining in faeling eyes. ‘I was looking to sweeten the pot. You’re the daughter of a *streetwalker* for Godssakes, and we’re trying to sit you on the throne of a bloody empire! Sweet Mothermaid, do you want to end daysdeath or not?’

“‘Of *course* I do!’

“‘Then why are you crawling up my backside for trying to help you do it?’

“‘Because I…’

“Dior turned to the flames, firelight dancing on pale blue.

“‘I just…’

“The Grail shook her head, cursing under her breath. And with a snarl, she punched the mantel, her good hand curled into a white-knuckled fist. The blow was fearsome, the strength in her blighted blood enough to crack the stone. But she left a smear of red behind, knuckles split wide.

“Dior hissed, bloodied fingers cradled in her mangled hand. She backed away, cursing again, trembling lips pressed thin. Reyne watched on, speaking soft into the quiet.

“‘Are you aright?’

“Dior stared at her bleeding knuckles, the scrapes already beginning to close. And turning to the girl she adored, the Grail shook her head and whispered.

“‘… No.’

“‘Oh, love,’ Reyne breathed.

“The Grail slid to her knees, and the Princess slipped down to meet her, Dior already crying as they threw their arms about each other. Dior’s sobs were bone-deep, shuddering, all the grief and blood and hurt and loss of the last few months spilling out of her in flood. Reyne was crying too, eyes closed as the girl in her arms shook like a leaf.

“‘It’s aright,’ she whispered, smoothing down those ashen curls. ‘It’s aright, Dior.’

“‘It’s *not* aright,’ Dior replied, face pressed into Reyne’s hair. ‘*I’m* not aright. Ever since Gabe left, it’s all gone to shite. I never thought it would be like this. I never…’

“The Grail closed her eyes, holding on to Reyne for dear life.

“‘I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you first,’ Reyne whispered. ‘Honestly, I only started considering the idea tonight. I’d chewed on it before, and it seemed like fancy, but the way Philippe looked at his mother when she shushed him publicly…' The Princess shook her head. 'It just … made sense to me suddenly. Like I saw it with new eyes.'

"Reyne squeezed tight, arms about Dior.

"'But you're right. I'm sorry.'

"Dior sniffed thickly, her voice just a whisper.

"'You know, ever since Rafa and Chloe found me in Lashaame, I was waiting for the other slipper to drop. Waiting for the grift. The fucking price I'd have to pay, and here it is. Same as it ever was. Everyone I care about either leaves, or gets taken away. Mama. Toff. Rafa. Bel. Saoirse. Chloe. Gabe. Phoebe.'

"She breathed deep and sighed.

"'Now you too.'

"Reyne shook her head, cupping Dior's face in her palms.

"'Dior, I'm not going anywhere.'

"The Grail met the taller girl's eyes, her own wet with tears.

"'Kiss me, then.'

"Reyne faltered, swallowing thick. 'I…'

"Dior leaned closer, whispering, tear-stung lips seeking Reyne's.

"'*Kiss* me.'

"'… I can't.'

"Reyne drew back from Dior's embrace, sighing.

"'How many times must you make me play the villain? We *can't,* Dior.'

"'Don't you love me anymore?'

"'Of course I do, but…'

"'But *what*?'

"'But Connor á Lachlainn is your father and mine! Godssakes, we're half *sisters*!'

"'We don't *know* that! Phoebe only *suspects* you're Connor's daughter; there's no proof save the color of your eyes! She could be wrong, she could b—'

"'And if she's not?' Reyne rose to her feet, incredulous now. 'You'd have us risk it? It's sin enough to do what we've been doing, let alone to taste that sin doubled!'

"'Don't say that,' Dior pleaded. 'No, don't call us a sin. It doesn't matter what some dusty book says, I know what I *feel,* Reyne. And I know you feel it too.'

"'I know I have responsibilities. *Both* of us do! All dances on a knife's edge here, Dior! You've a need to keep this city's favor if you've a hope to sit the throne. You're the chaste and holy maiden now, but if rumor started that the Princess of Low and High and the Grail of San Michon were not only joined in lust unnatural, but were *sisters* also—'

"Dior flinched then, as if Reyne had struck her.

"'Unnatural.'

“Reyne drew a calming breath. ‘That is *not* what I meant. I say what others will see. This is the imperial court, Dior, you’ve *no* idea how poisonous these serpents hiss. I was raised among Elidaeni nobility, I know how they think. You must trust my counsel here.’

“‘It *is* what you meant.’

“Dior rose to her feet, trembling now.

“‘And worse, it’s what you think.’

“‘No.’

“Reyne reached for Dior, but the Grail stepped away.

“‘Sweet Mothermaid, what a fucking *idiot* I’ve been,’ she breathed. ‘All this time, you’ve told me you weren’t ready. And I was good with that, I honestly was. I thought it was because you were raised godly, that you’d come to me in time, but…’

“The Grail scoffed, no more tears in her eyes.

“*‘Unnatural.’*

“‘Dior, please—’

“‘Get out of here, Reyne.’

“‘Dior—’

“‘GET THE *FUCK* OUT!’

“The Grail snatched a carafe from the mantel and flung it at the wall. Crystal shattered into a thousand glittering shards, wine spattering like blood, dripping down the stone. The girls stared at each other, cheeks pinked, fists clenched, drenched in exhaustion and rage and foolish pride. So far they’d come together, so much they’d shared, now splintered and glittering on the floor.

“‘You’re a coward, Reyne á Maergenn,’ Dior hissed. ‘A coward and a fucking *liar*.’

“Reyne clenched her jaw at that, rage seething in the green and blue of her eyes. But she’d been brought up in these halls, remember. Raised among serpents. And rather than lose her temper in kind, the daughter of Niamh Nineswords inclined her head and hissed.

“‘My Lady Grail.’

“‘Princess,’ Dior replied.

“And slamming the door behind her, Reyne swept from the room.”

V

THE PROVINCE OF FOOLS

“WE WERE PRETENDING to read when Dior came to us.

“As I told you, Maryn and I were being kept as ‘guests’ at the Empress’s pleasure, but our prison was an entire *wing* of Château Impérial, replete with bedchambers, a walled courtyard of dead trees, and a library vast enough to rival the one beneath San Yves Priory. The tomes were countless—more than any mortal could hope to read in their lifetime. And as is the way with the wealthy and their books, most were completely untouched.

“We were not really in the mood to read, but the library was quiet, and there were precious few reflective surfaces among those shelves. We’d drawn the curtains closed to cover the glass, and we were sat in a grand leather divan by the light of a single chymical globe, a gold-trimmed tome in our lap. But our focus was on the mote of our blood, riding among Dior’s ashen curls as she stomped down an opulently appointed hallway.

“A handful of Unbound hurried behind, boots tromping on marbled flagstones. Every man among them looked uncertain; their messiah filled with a rage they’d seldom seen. Dior was a tiny tempest, mangled hand clenched into a half fist, her other wrapped about a crystal carafe as she stormed down the corridor, pausing to take the occasional swig.

“*Thumpthumpthump.*

“We looked toward the library’s great double doors.

“*Thumpthumpthump.*

“‘Celene, are you in there?’

"'Coming, Dior.'

"We opened the doors, and there she stood; dressed in white, lips smudged red. She'd been crying, accusing eyes upon the dozen guards outside our door, her Unbound assembled behind with expressions ranging from bewilderment to concern. Our guards were armed with silver, clad in livery of the Holy Inquisition; crimson tabards embroidered with the flower and flail of Naél, Angel of Bliss. They were a baleful-looking lot, in charge of our keeping since first we'd arrived. Still holding her carafe of wine, Dior dragged her sleeve across tear-wet cheeks.

"'Let me pass, you fuck-eyed little pigdick.'

"The inquisitor capitaine was a hulking slice of ill-cooked beef named Moulin, with the cruel gaze and cold sneer of a fellow who kicked kittens for jollies.

"'Apologies, Mlle du Graal. But the High Inquisitrix gave order that the Dead were to receive no visitors.'

"'Well the *Empress* declared me savior of this city at church today for maybe the tenth time this month,' Dior growled. 'And I'm about two mouthfuls of wine and a wristjob away from sitting my shapely arse on the throne. So if you're looking to piss off the wrong sort of people, you're going about it the right way, shitbreath.'

"'Please forgive her, Capitaine,' we said. 'She is upset.'

"Moulin clenched his jaw, silent as the grave. Followers of the Angel Naél were renowned as merciless fanatics, enemies to heretics the empire over, loyal unto death. But staring hard at Dior, the grizzled soldier murmured.

"'My son was on the walls at Lastbridge the day you fought the Maiden in Place San Antoine. God knows what fate he might've met if not for you.'

"With a nod for his soldiers to do the same, the capitaine finally stepped aside.

"'Consider our debt repaid.'

"Subdued now, the Grail mumbled thanks, shuffling past the inquisitors with eyes downturned in shame. Nodding to our guards, Dior's Unbound, we closed the door behind her, turning to watch her flop onto the divan. Wine splashed from her carafe, and she cursed, smudging the stain across the velvet with her mangled hand.

"We took away the wine, sat down opposite. 'You are drunk.'

"'Gabe would say I'm *merry,*' Dior replied, blinking hard. 'But this is the first time I've had this much wine, and honestly, I don't see what's so fucking jolly about it.'

"'Celebrating victories, or drowning sorrows?'

"'No drowning these fuckers, Castia. They swim better than me.'

"We nodded. 'Something about a wedding proposition?'

"Her eyes sharpened then. 'Heard about that, did you?'

"'We hear a great deal, Dior. Even locked in here.'

“She scowled, dragging one hand through her hair. ‘What a carnivale of shite. I mean, can you imagine? Me married to that poncy toff wanker?’

“‘Honestly, it does not seem the worst of options right now.’

“‘Well, a kick to the face is better than a boot to the crotch. But you’re still sampling shoe leather, either way.’ Glowering, she reached for the wine. ‘Thank God and Mothermaid Gabe will be here with Phoebe soon. He’ll talk to Isabella, he’ll sort all this shit out.’

“We snatched the carafe out of her reach, scowling. ‘You *still* do not see, do you?’

“‘… See what?’

“‘You do not need Gabriel, Dior. You do not need Phoebe or Reyne or Maryn or me. The strongest fires welcome the wind, mon amie. And your flame surpasses us all. *You* are the one who saved this city. *You* are the one from whom the deathless legions fled.’

“‘Fled? Or just backed away from for a while?’

“She leaned forward then, elbows to knees.

“‘Doesn’t it bother you? That we still don’t know what the *fuck* Voss wants with me?’

“‘It does not matter, Dior. We will never let him take you.’

“‘But don’t you want to *know*? I mean, if the fate of the whole world is at stake here, why are we playing with only half a deck?’

“‘We cannot know the mind of the Forever King.’

“‘But we can know his daughter’s.’

“Our jaw clenched at that. Looking into the carafe between us, we saw a reflection moving on the glass. A shadow, vast and impossible, rolling beneath our surface. We remembered that cathedral of mirrors within us. That church of souls, built only of our mind. We could confront her there perhaps. Find out who was truly the master here.

“But as the shadow on the crystal swelled, glowering at us, we turned our eyes away. And looking to Dior, we sighed.

“‘I fear we are not strong enough to wrest the truth from Aléne, mon amie. You cannot imagine her power. Her *hatred* for us. But in the end, it will not matter. Once you are sat upon the throne and the black veil across heaven is parted, Voss and whatever designs he has for you will be left in ashes. To wear a troth ring, even one given by a … poncy wanker … seems a small sacrifice for that.’

“‘You think I should do it?’

“‘I think it does not matter how we feel about it. How do *you* feel?’

“‘… Like shit.’

“She sucked her lip, arms wrapped about herself.

“‘I know there’s more in the balance here than just me and Reyne. And this sister bollocks has got us both twisted sideways. But … it hurt to be bandied around in public like that. Used like a piece in some game. I … I didn’t think she thought of me that way.’

“‘The Princess does what she feels she must. As you say, this is not just about you.’

“‘Still hurts.’

“‘It always does, Dior. There is a reason poets declare love the province of fools.’

“‘Talking from experience, eh?’

“‘It could be said.’

“Dior smiled sadly. ‘You still owe me the end of your story, you know.’

“‘You were *supposed* to be earning that tale with your achievements in the arte of sanguimancy. And you have woefully neglected your training in recent nights.’ We inclined our head, smile hidden behind our mask. ‘Although we admit, when you fought Kestrel, you showed no small mastery of our lessons. It made us proud, Dior.’

“The Grail smiled weakly, shaking her head.

“‘I can’t really remember … When I was the wolf, it’s like … squinting through smoke. I can see myself if I try, but it’s as if I’m recalling a story someone else told me. I remember feeling pain when Reyne fell. I remember knowing Kestrel was my enemy. That I *hated* her. But … not much else.’

“‘Have you tried since? To dance?’

“‘No,’ she sighed. ‘Too frightened of what might happen. Without Phoebe here…’

“‘We cannot counsel you in such matters. But we’d suggest when Reyne fell, you became a creature of instinct. You did not think. You acted. Just as you did that night we frightened you on *Dawnseeker*. This power is within you, Dior. Part of you understands, even if the whole does not.’

“She scoffed. ‘Don’t think, in other words? Just do?’

“‘Better to think of it as trusting yourself. You have a golden heart, chérie. We would advise you pay heed to it. On matters of blood. Of destiny. Of matrimony.’ She glanced up at that, scowling. ‘Or in any other regard. It knows what is right. It always has.’

“‘If you were to ask it yesterday, it’d have told you *Reyne* was right.’ Staring into the gloom, Dior shook her head. ‘But like I say. This is about more than me and her.’

“‘And love is for fools.’

“Dior breathed deep, licking wine-red lips as she met my eyes.

“‘I think we’re past the whole nine lives thing. And if you’ve no wish to, I understand. But if you *want* to talk about it…’

“‘It hurts to talk about it, Dior. Though every choice I ever made has led me to this, to you…’ We looked to the carafe, the shadows coiled upon those tiny reflections. ‘It is a long, hard road out of hell, mon amie.’

“‘Have you ever told anyone? What happened?’

“We thought we heard a small sound then, as if the fluttering of tiny wings. We glanced to the shelves, the shadows, Maryn's words ringing in our ears.

"'No.'

"Dior leaned back in the divan, eyes on mine. I was struck with how stately she looked then. How much she'd grown this last year. There was a fire in her now, rising for months but bursting fully into flame after that battle with Kestrel. It was difficult to remember sometimes, but this girl stood at the cusp of only eighteen years on this earth. As fanciful as it might have seemed when we began, we could *see* her sitting on the throne now, decked in imperial gold. A child of two worlds, who might unite the Moonsthrone and the empire as one, just as her ancestor Ailidh had tried to do. As the *Redeemer* had tried to do. So much power and potential resided in her. So much hope. She was a queen, we knew it now. A queen just waiting for her crown.

"But more, she was the closest thing to a friend we had on this earth.

"'I'm here,' she offered.

"And so …

"And so."

The Last Liathe hung her head and sighed.

"We spoke."

VI

FOURTH DAWN

"'I TOLD YOU of that night's beginning, Dior. The ball at Château Durand where I took my first communion. When Laurent first kissed me. But I did not tell you its end.'

"The library about us was silent, and I could hear the soft beat of Dior's heart. Her eyes were on mine, pale blue in the dark, but my own were fixed on the carafe between us. His face, reflected over and over now upon those facets of crystal.

"*Traitor,* Wulfric hissed. *Deceiver.*

"I turned away, back toward that night.

"'Even as I'd drunk Victorine down, I'd heard the commotion outside. But it wasn't until I peered out from the balcony I understood. The château grounds were *filled* with people—revelers from the ball come to gawp, gens d'armes with burning brands sweeping the estate. Down by the stables, I saw soldiers and the Baron himself silhouetted against rising flames. I remembered Percival and Aleks had left the ball in pursuit of their marks, and I looked for them among the crowd. But I could see neither them nor my master.

"'*Vampyr!* came the cry.

"'*The Dead, by God! The Dead are among us!*

"'Heavy fists pounded the bedchamber door.

"'*Master Laurent? Are you well?*

"'My songbird startled at the cry, his pulse quickened. He was covered in blood, the carpets drenched red and Victorine's wasted corpse twisted upon the floor—there could be no hiding what happened here. His eyes were sightless yet full of love as he turned to me.

"'*Go, Celene.*

"'I obeyed, scrambling up the wall and over the rooftops. I could hear barking hounds now, raised voices, but I didn't stop to look behind. Leaping down to the snow and over the château walls, I fled, off through the falling grey before any could mark me. I knew not what happened to Wulfric or the others, nor to the kith we stalked that night, but I was certain *someone* had perished—that awful scream I'd heard still echoing in my ears as I slipped down the midnight thoroughfares, back toward our home.

"'Toward the priory.

"'Through the side entrance I stole, down stairs I'd trod a thousand nights before. But already I could feel this night was different, the scent of burning candles mixed with the stink of charred hair and meat as I dashed through the wending maze beneath those hallowed halls. And barreling out into our library, I discovered Aleks laid upon one of the tables, Percival beside her, head hung low and cheeks wet with blood.

"'*What happened?* I hissed.

"'*The m-mortals.*

"'His whisper was pained, edged with rage. I saw Percival was beaten, scorched, his lordly finery in ashen tatters.

"'*C-Celene …*

"'I rushed to Aleks's side, face twisted in anguish at the sight of her. She'd been burned, oh God, burned so *awfully* I could scarcely recognize her. Gone was that wondrous white gown, those golden curls, her flesh charred to the bone. She clutched my hand so tight she almost crushed it, her eyes burned blind yet still seeking mine.

"'*It h-hurts, little sister. Oh, help m-me, Almighty God …*

"'*Aleks.*

"'I turned and saw Wulfric, now stood in the library doorway. A zephyr he was, flashing to Aleks's side, agony in his eyes to match her own as he sank to his knees.

"'*Oh, my brave liathe, what have they done to thee?*

"'He took her hand and kissed it, though it was barely more than a blackened twist of charred sticks. The hurt in his voice set me wondering if perhaps he and Aleks had become *more* than master and acolyte—if I'd been so busy dallying with Laurent that I'd missed some secret dalliance beneath our own roof.

"'*What in the name of God and Illia happened?* he asked me.

"'*I was not there, Master.*

"'Wulfric's eyes fell on Percival then; that little face wet with bloody tears.

"'*Our m-marks were taking a pair of doves off to tumble, Master. They spotted* *me and Aleks as we shadowed them from the ball. But the house gens d'armes were roused at the clamor, and they arrived with t-torches. Aleks was already wounded by the Dyvok …*

"'Percival shook his head, glowering at me.

"'*Where* were *you, Celene?*

"'*Where was I?* My eyes narrowed, sorrow pricked to rage. *Where I was* supposed *to be, Percival! I was watching the Whisper!*

"'*I told you to tell Master that Aleks and I were headed after our marks!*

"'*And* my *mark was on the move! I'd no time to run errands for you!*

"'*Enough!* Wulfric snapped. *This be no time for squabbling! We have come close to calamity, and should thank God Almighty for his mercy. If Aleks had died by the flame this night, her soul would be lost to flame* eternal.

"'He signed the wheel, Aleks moaning in agony as he pressed her blackened knuckles once more to his lips. And I saw the fire of fury sparked in those black eyes.

"'*We shall avenge these hurts in time. We shall* find *these kith and deliver them t—*

"'His voice stilled, eyes drifting to the ceiling. And though my senses were not as sharp, still I caught the edge of it; the sound of a multitude. Raised voices. Snatches of scripture. A pounding, faint but heavy, as of fists upon the priory doors.

"'*… Were ye followed?*

"'I realized Wulfric was speaking to me, shaking my head as I replied, *No. No, Master. None marked my path here, I made sure of it.*

"'He turned to Percival then. *And thee?*

"'*I …* He glanced to Aleks, licking at his lips. *No, Master. None saw us.*

"'*A child. Carrying a full-grown woman through midnight streets? And in such a state?* Wulfric's eyes narrowed. *Yet not a single soul marked thy coming here?*

"'Percival glanced to me, fear in his eyes now. *Master, I—*

"'The pounding came again, the sound of crashing timbers. Dread uncoiling in my belly, I realized that after years of hiding beneath San Yves's skin, we were at last undone. I could hear them now: running feet, bellowing voices, shrieking nuns. The catacombs beneath the priory were hidden, but not so well they'd not be unearthed in time. We couldn't simply wait down here to be discovered. But with Aleks so hurt …

"'I wondered what this moment might have felt like in times of old, with the sun full risen and nowhere to run. I knew Wulfric had already lived through terror like that, his tales of the Charbourg's fall ringing now in my mind as he looked to the shelves about us.

"'*Gather the scriptures, Celene. No more than thou canst carry. It may be we can return in time, but save the most—*

"'A crash rang out above, a scream, the clamor of dozens, hundreds of people.

"'*Find the vampyr!*

"'*The little one! Find the little one!*

"'Percival blanched at that, eyes gone wide.

"'*Fetch Grace,* Wulfric snarled, towering over him. *And gather clothes. Weapons. A shovel. We will be sleeping rough amorrow, thanks to thy incompetence. But think not that shall be the end of thy punishment, little Percival.* He looked to me, black eyes burning. *Gather the holy words. I will ensure the way is clear. Go, both of thee!*

"'We did as commanded, Percival dashing off to gather belongings while I headed to the shelves. With what little reverence time afforded, I filled a chest with gold-trimmed codices, those gospels of the Faithful that had survived the exodus from Charbourg. By the time I was done, Wulfric had returned, informing us the side passage was clear, be swift now, be *swift*. Percival dashed back into the room with a trunk under one arm and a cat under the other, Grace looking distinctly displeased at the interruption to her evening. My master lifted Aleks gently from the table and she cried out in agony, her fangs pearl white against the blackened wreckage of her face.

"'*D-don't let me die, Master. Please, don't let me b-burn.*

"'*Fear not, my brave liathe. The kingdom of God* will *be thine.*

"'Aleks closed her blinded eyes, bloody tears spilling down scorched cheeks. We ran swift as silver up from the priory's bowels, Wulfric in front, Aleks in his arms, Percival and I behind. We could hear folk rampaging through the halls above, cries of outrage and the stink of smoke. Up the wending stairs we fled, fleeting shadows, spilling finally out into the cold San Yves streets.

"'Cold. But no longer empty.

"'More folk had gathered, surrounding the priory now. Gawping commoners and outraged rabble mostly, but among them were gens d'armes in the Baron's red livery. They carried spears and swords, burning torches illuminating the sea of horrified faces, a woman raising one finger and screaming in the night.

"'*Vampyr! God help us,* VAMPYR*!*

"'The soldiers advanced across snow-clad cobbles, flames in hand. With a shout, Percival dropped Grace and tossed me a sword, stepping to meet them. They were brave men, defending their city from the monsters among them. But in the end they were only mortal, the crowd screaming in horror as we put them down; too swift, too strong, too awful to counter. But more were coming; more men, more flames, closing on all sides now.

"'And so, Wulfric stepped to the fore.

"'He still carried Aleks over his shoulder, broken and blackened. But in his free hand, he wielded his blade of blood, sprung from his opened palm as he set to. He prayed for forgiveness as he slew those soldiers, face drawn and grim. But in his eyes, I could see fear now; the same terror he must have felt during Charbourg's fall, as the Emperor's crusaders swept into the holy city and Voss's Knights of Blood burned Illia's dream to ash.

"'*Head for the westwall!* he roared. *Go!*

"'*Master, we'll not leave you!*

"'*Save the scriptures, go, Celene!*

"'I did as he bid, cutting down a fresh-faced boy in Durand red and snatching up the chest of our holy texts. Slinging it onto my shoulder, I hacked my way through the crowd, Percival beside me, desperate and afeared. Commonfolk scattered, soldiers charged, Wulfric holding off the flood of brave men now rushing at our backs.

"'I heard screams, bodies falling, prayers to God. Turning, I saw my master surrounded, the cobbles drenched red. He stood like a black angel, silhouetted in torchlight, all his terrible wrath unveiled. But among the soldiers now, I saw a young parish priest dressed only in his nightshirt, holding aloft a weapon more fearsome than any flame.

"'A wheel of burning silver.

"'My master was as faithful a servant of the Lord as I had known. An elder of the Esana, drenched in centuries, survivor of the greatest calamity our faith ever suffered. But in the face of that symbol of the God who had damned us, he was as helpless as a fledgling, staggering back with one arm over his eyes.

"'*Back to the pit, devil!* the priest cried. *The Lord is my shield, unbreakable!*

"'Fire fell then; a rain of burning arrows from a cadre of archers, new arrived in the chaos. And though my master was a creature who danced between the sands of the hourglass, he was blinded by that wheel in the priest's hands. Three arrows struck; two into Wulfric, one into Aleks, clutched still in his arms. And as those arrows hit home, that fire took hold, like a spark to kindling starved by long-lost days of summer.

"'Wulfric roared, his coat catching fire, his hair with it. He might've fled then, bursting into his flight of moths and winging his way to safety. Yet he refused to abandon Aleks to that mob. Instead he lashed out, blinded yet trying to carve a path away from all that silver and fire, Aleks screaming in his arms.

"I skidded to a halt, roaring, *Percy, we must save them!*

"'*Master told us to run!*

"'*We can't abandon them!*

"Percival looked back, Wulfric's promise of punishment hanging in the air.

"'*I'll not burn for anyone!*

"'With a curse, Percival ran on, hurling aside his burdens so his little legs might carry him the swifter. But despite my fear of those earthly flames, the fires of hell awaiting, I started hacking my way back toward my master's side.

"'His cloak and hair were ablaze now, but still he refused to abandon

Aleks. I threw myself into those men, fighting as Wulfric had taught, awash in soldiers and silver and hurling my chest of scriptures like a spear. It struck the priest, knocking him back, that burning wheel flying from his hand. And at Wulfric's side, we cut a bloody swath across the cobbles, away from the priory and down the Rue des Saints. I heard Percival screaming for help, cornered by more soldiers with torches, his little body now ablaze. He spun as he burned, arms flailing, voice cracking, but my thoughts were only for Aleks and my master.

"'I could smell Wulfric burning as we ran, sizzling meat and charring hair, finally reaching the fountain of San Antoine. And into those waters Wulfric plunged himself and Aleks both, steam hissing and smoke rising as those awful fires were finally extinguished.

"'He surfaced with a gasp; no more the dark beauty, but a scorched ruin. Yet the one he'd carried in his arms, the one he'd fought so hard to save—poor, sweet Aleks—was little more than a charred skeleton, crumbling in Wulfric's grip even as he held her tighter. In desperation, he bit down upon the wreckage of her throat, seeking a vein; some way he might drink down the last drop of her and carry her soul until the day of judging. But I could see the futility in it, my cheeks wet with tears as I whispered.

"'*She's gone, Master.*

"'*No*, he hissed, ruined lips peeling back from his teeth. *No, she—*

"'Cries rang down the way, soldiers yet in pursuit, that priest in his bloody nightshirt at the fore. I grabbed Wulfric's arm as burning arrows started to fall.

"'*We must be gone too, lest we join her in damnation!*

"'He was wounded. Terribly, *awfully* burned, and well I knew the agony he suffered—both for himself and the one we'd lost. But still he shook his head.

"'*Ye did not abandon me, Celene. I shall not—*

"'*I can make my own way! Now get gone before you and all those you carry are lost to the pit with Aleks!*

"'His face twisted, eyes falling on those oncoming soldiers, that damned priest.

"'*… There be a ruin in the Orhomme. One night west of here.*

"'*I will find you.*

"'*Thy loyalty will be r-remembered. Rewarded.* He touched my cheek then, dark eyes shining. *Thou art* ready, *Celene. For the final m-mystery of our faith.*

"'*Go,* I whispered, weeping. *For the love of God.*

"'The soldiers were close, arrows falling, priest roaring. And with the sound of tearing cloth, the scent of burned blood, Wulfric burst apart, a hundred moths now fluttering up into black night skies. The soldiers cried out in horror and wonder, the priest bellowed the name of God. But I was running then, off through frozen streets, away from those hungry flames, those righteous men who sought to burn the monsters from their midst. Down Rue des Saints, through the Quartier des Théâtres and the red-light district, and finally to the western walls.

"'But I didn't throw myself over.

"'Instead, I looked back toward Rue de la Montagne, to the estate of Baron Durand.

"'I could still hear Laurent's declaration of love in my mind.

"'My own promise to return.

"'And I turned my back on escape.

"'Instead, I stole through the night, a shadow within shadows darker. The streets were flooded with soldiers, torches lighting the night near bright as day. And so I made my way back to the sight of my first murder in the name of God—the house of good Père Beaufoy. The estate had been taken over by his replacement, perhaps the very same priest who'd near destroyed my master that night. But that little cemetery behind the house was still there, yet forgotten and overgrown.

"'Silent as smoke, I stole into the crypt, lying among the bones and dust. And there in the dark I waited.

"'Listened.

"'Prayed.

"'Three nights and days.

"'I grieved in that darkness. For poor Aleks. Even little Percival. Both had been famille, Faithful, and now they were lost to hellfire forever. I wondered why God had punished them. If in turn he'd punish me. If in the end, I *deserved* it.

"'*All on earth, the work of his hand …*

"'And finally, in the dark hours before the fourth dawn, I arose from my grave.

"'I was hungry now. *Aching*. Knowing I must soon be gone from the City of Spears forever. But though patrols had doubled, San Yves had quieted just a little now. I was still clad in the gown I'd worn to the ball, snatching a cloak from a hanging line to hide the gravedust and dirt. My mask still covered my face, but I'd be marked by any who saw me, and so I stole down Rue de la Montagne in the predawn black, careful as cats.

"'Back to Château Durand.

"'Gens d'armes stood vigil at the gates, and I waited near an hour before I took my chance, leaping over the walls, scaling the balcony outside his room. I crouched in the black, still as stone, listening for signs I'd been marked. A silver wheel hung above the door now, a braid of maiden's hair wrapped about the handles, pages of the Testaments plastered upon the glass. But I heard soft footsteps, softer breath, a whisper from beyond the glass.

"'… *Celene?*

"'*It's me, Laurent.*

"'*Oh, merci, mon dieu.*

"'The door was unlocked, the braid broken open, the wheel pulled down after a few groping, blind attempts. And then I was in Laurent's arms, his body still warm from his bed, the scent of life, the song of his pulse so loud it near unmade me. He breathed thanks into my hair, squeezing me tight. And drawing me within, he pressed his lips to mine.

"'At least, the lips he *thought* were mine. Cold porcelain between us, and only blind eyes to see. But still, I pressed what passed for my own mouth against the other side of my mask, as if I might taste some hint of the love he promised.

"'*I knew you'd come,* he whispered. *Papa said they burned you, but I* knew *you'd survive. I've been waiting for you, love. Waiting every night.*

"'I realized Laurent was dressed; gone to sleep in leather britches and a fine frockcoat, golden buttons and velvet, the red of his house. Slipping from my arms, he fetched a coinpurse from his bedside drawer, bulging near to bursting.

"'*We can go anywhere. We can do anything.*

"'*Laurent …*

"'*I don't care what you are. I don't care what they say. You're no monster, I know it in my heart. I love you, Celene Castia. And God willing, I'll love you forever.*

"I looked at him in that dark; beautiful, vibrant, such wild hope in those sightless eyes, it broke my heart to pieces. I thought about all we might have together. What we might be to each other. But it had been three nights since I'd fed, and the hunger roiled within me then, as if to remind me what I was.

"'What *this* was.

"'I knew our time in San Yves was done. And though we'd suffered an awful blow, my faith was undimmed—burning *brighter* in fact, with Victorine's blood now inside me. I was grieved poor Aleks and Percy had been lost to damnation, but I knew I'd saved another soul from hell. I understood now, what God intended for me. And Wulfric's promise hung in the air; the knowledge of this greatest mystery of the Esana, earned at last.

"'I couldn't turn my back on my Faith now.

"'I'd been wrong to invite myself into this boy's life. Wrong to let him love me. He'd been an escape, I realized. Something that was mine. Something to cling to as all I'd been faded away. But what could I truly offer him? What could I be to him? This had been selfish. And foolish. And I was lucky my indulgence hadn't cost him more than a broken heart.

"'Because break it I must …

"'*Laurent—*

"'*I should have known.*

"'I turned, a knife of ice in my belly as I saw the shadow on the balcony.

He was dressed in rags, his body still a ruin, fingers like scorched twigs. But the eyes staring from the wreckage of that face, I'd have known anywhere.

"'*Master Wulfric …*

"'*Master.*

"'Wulfric scoffed, stepping through the open door, his invitation from the ball holding true. Laurent's heartbeat quickened, blind eyes searching the gloom.

"'*… Celene?*

"'*Ye dare name me Master? When thou hast deceived me so completely?*

"I backed off a step, putting myself between Wulfric and Laurent. I was drenched in panic now, fingernails biting my palms, tongue dry as dust.

"'*How did you find me?*

"'I fell silent as a blood-red moth crawled from the folds of my once-beautiful dress, taking flight across the room. Wulfric held out his hand, his voice suddenly, terribly sad.

"'*I was … afraid for thee. I thought to keep an eye out. Help in thy escape.*

"'The moth landed upon Wulfric's charred skin, sinking beneath the surface, my heart sinking with it. He looked at me then, lips parted, face twisted, and it was not his rage that brought the tears to my eyes. It was his *disappointment*. Though I'd lied to him, I was still in awe of my master. He'd given me a place to belong, a belief greater than myself, something holy to be a part of. Through all I'd suffered, all I'd seen, he'd offered what no one else could—a path to the salvation of my soul.

"'Without him … I'd have nothing.

"'*I gave thee freedom,* he whispered. *I did not spy upon thy business, nor pry into thy mind. I* trusted *thee, Celene. To hold to the scriptures. Live up to the Vow.*

"'*And I have, Master, I—*

"'*Bonds earthly we sever. His servants forever. I* warned *thee, Celene Castia.* Those black eyes fell on Laurent then, brimming with fury. *We are not their kind.*

"'*I know it, Master. My eyes are open, I came here tonight …*

"'I glanced to Laurent, his face filled with such fear and wonder and hope …

"'*Celene?* he whispered.

"'*I came here tonight to say good-bye.*

"'I saw Laurent flinch then, as if I'd thrust a broken blade into his chest. Disbelief. Anger. Sorrow. All crossed his face in a handful of beats from that breaking heart. He'd put such faith in me. Such hope. But Wulfric spoke before he could reply.

"'*And well ye should. For good-bye this is.*

"'I held up my hand to stay his temper. *Please …*

"'*Ye killed them. Percival and Aleks. They burn in hellfire because of thee.*

"'*No, no, I—*

"'*Percival told thee to fetch me at the ball. If I had been there, Aleks would not have been burned. They would not have been followed. But seek me out, ye did* not. *Ye were in here.* A snarl, pearl-white and savage. *Protecting* him.

"'*Master, please, I will go with you, I will* obey *you, I—*

"'*Thou hast failed me, Liathe. Thou hast cost us our home and delivered thy siblings to the fires of the abyss. But though thy faith hath proved wanting, I shall not have thee suffer the same. Ye may thank God for that mercy at least.*

"'I cried warning, begging him stop, *stop,* but he flew across the room and slammed me into the wall so hard the bricks split. Laurent begged to know what was happening, but I couldn't even whisper, throat crushed in Wulfric's grip.

"'But truth was, though he was steeped in centuries and countless souls, my master had been bitterly wounded by those flames. His muscle had been chewed clean through in places, bones brittle as chalk. And with a gasp, I broke free, fingers splintering, blood spattering. I kicked out and my master flew, crashing back into Laurent's piano, timbers cracking, strings snapping in one last discordant hymn as I yelled at Laurent to run.

"'Wulfric snaked to his feet, digging claws into his palm and flicking his wrist. But his veins had been boiled near dry by those flames, not enough left to form his blade. With a snarl he flew at me instead, punching, clawing, a savage hook knocking my mask loose. I collapsed into the piano's wreckage, trying to rise, but Wulfric was on me in a heartbeat, seizing a fistful of hair and smashing my face into the boards, over and over.

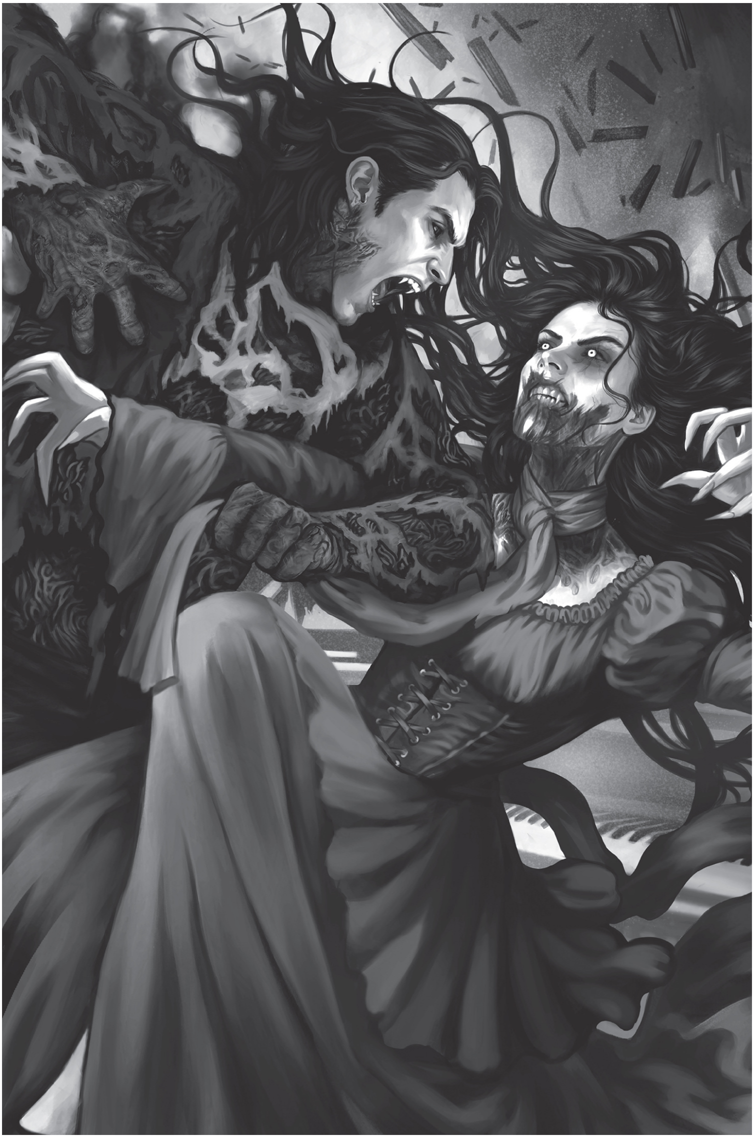
"He flipped me onto my back, plunging claws into my neck, fingers closing about the rope of my tongue. I gargled as he *pulled,* muscle stretched, tendons snapping.

"'*I should rip this from thy lying m—*

"'The blow was a clumsy one, the boy delivering it blind as a newborn pup. But aiming for Wulfric's voice, Laurent struck true, bringing the broken piano leg down on his neck and shoulder. Wood cracked, bone splintered, my master snarling in fury. And with a black curse, he lashed out at Laurent's neck.

"'The blow struck deep, red and red and red. With a bubbling gasp, my songbird fell, blood spraying as he collapsed into his piano's ruins. And with a roar, I rose from those splinters and crashed into Wulfric's back.

"'We hit the boards, and beneath the choir of our snarls, the distant sound of gens d'armes shouting alarm, I could hear Laurent gasping, choking. I was desperate to break free, to *save* him, but Wulfric wouldn't let me rise. Instead, he seized hold of me in an embrace deep as death and plunged his fangs into my throat.



“‘He drank me then. Starving. Wounded. Dry as a thousand deserts. But though in consuming me, I knew he’d save my immortal soul, I’d no wish at all to die. With no other weapon to hand, I plunged my fangs into *his* throat in turn. And wrapped in each other’s arms, we raced to the bottom of our barrels.

“‘He was old. Powerful. Hundreds of years his keeping. But those flames had bit deep, his strength not what it was, and *I* had never been stronger. I crushed him to me, my master, my dark father, remembering what my *true* father had told me all those years ago.

"'*Castles are made of stone, Little Mountain. And so are you.*

"'And in our race to the bottom, I realized I was *winning.*

"'Wulfric seized tight, desperate now, unleashing his sanguimancy upon me. My blood grew hot in my veins, pain become *agony* as it began to boil, but still I swallowed, *still* I drank. And though Wulfric fought, furious, I realized beneath his rage he was *terrified* that after all he had endured—the war, the blood, the centuries—it might end like this. Fear made him desperate, and he plunged into my mind, seeking pity now from she who'd have received none from him. But it was too late to stop even if I wanted to, my whole body aflame with it; the power and potency of every shivering, burning mouthful.

"'Communion.

"'Communion such as I could never have *dreamed.*

"'I could feel a *tempest,* seething beyond the cusp of his flesh. Hundreds of voices, hundreds of souls clamoring against the bonds of his immortal shell. And as that shell began to crumble, they began to flood through *him* into me. A raging red deluge, smashing down upon me and threatening to undo all I was. But still I held on, still I *endured,* the Mountain both my fathers had made me. And with one last gasp …

"'*J-J-Judgment C-Comes …*

"'… dread Wulfric, soldier of the Faithful, Lord of San Yves, survivor of Charbourg's fall and keeper of a hundred shriven souls, crumbled to dust in my arms.

"'All was fire. All was flood. The storm I'd felt in him raging now in *me.* The power, the potency, infused and distilled, the strength of hundreds, the might of Gods, the flame of faith burning bright as I hissed through bloody fangs.

"'*By this blood shall we have life eternal.*

"'It was his gasping that dragged me from it—down from that blissful red heaven to cold, grey earth. Laurent lay with hand to throat, blood soaking his shirt through. I could hear heavy boots, voices shouting his name, and yet I flew across the sopping carpet to his side. My songbird gasped like a landed fish, white as chalk as I bit into my skin.

"'*Laurent, drink,* I begged. *Drink,* please.

"'I pressed a bleeding wrist to his mouth, praying God and all his angels not to let this poor boy die. He grabbed hold, shaking, swallowing red. Though I was but young in the blood, that blood was now impossibly thickened, all Wulfric's power distilled within me. And as I watched, I saw the ravaged flesh of Laurent's throat mercifully stitching closed.

"'*Merci, saint-père,* I breathed, looking up to heaven. *Oh,* merci*, mon dieu.*

"'*You brought m-me back.*

"'Laurent blinked, bewildered, shaking like a leaf as he whispered.

"'*You* are *an angel.*

"'And reaching up, he cupped my cheek.

"'His expression shifted, wonder to bewilderment, as his fingers drifted over my skin. I realized then my mask was gone; smashed loose in the battle against my master. That for the first time, my sweet songbird was seeing me as I truly was.

"'And he was *horrified.*

"'*What …*

"'He snaked upright, fear and revulsion twisting that beautiful face into something awful. Laurent reached out again, fingertips questing over the ruins of my throat, the blood-slicked muscle, the naked teeth in slimy bone. I know now that my face was not half the ruin it had been before I'd drunk Wulfric to ashes. That his blood had returned *something* of what I'd been. But to poor Laurent, I must have seemed a horror.

"'*What are you?* he hissed, shrinking back.

"'I hung my head then, bloody tears in my eyes.

"'*I am not your kind.*

"'Heavy blows rained on the door, wood splintering as it was kicked in. *Master Laurent!* came the cry, *Almighty God!* and men rushed into the room, burning torches in hand. At the sound of his name, Laurent scuttled toward them, face twisted as he roared.

"'*Get it away! Get it away, it's a monster!*

"'I sighed then. Whispering the only truth I could be sure of anymore.

"'*No more than the monster he made me.*'"

The Last Liathe fell silent, the rushing river's song filling the void. Jean-François stopped writing, gazing across the river at this thing he so feared and despised. She seemed not much an abomination in that moment, but just a girl; small and pale and caught up in something far bigger than she.

That was the true horror of her, he supposed.

That looks, like Celene Castia herself, could be so deceiving.

"I sat in silence at the end of my tale," she finally sighed. "The library about me echoing with Laurent's cries, my skull with Wulfric's whispers. I could see him reflected on the crystal carafe still, black eyes boring into mine.

"*Traitor,* he hissed. *Deceiver.*

"'I'm sorry, Celene.'

"I looked up from his reflection as Dior spoke. Her cheeks were wet with tears, her kerchief sodden. She shook her head, mopping at her lashes.

"'I'm so sorry that happened to you.'

"We shrugged. 'Love is for fools.'

"'Do you know what became of him? Laurent?'

"'He died,' I whispered. 'When the Forever King took San Yves. He'd been wed by then. A lady of quality for his bride. They'd a son, just a babe when

Voss broke down the gates of the City of Spears. I hope he was happy, before the end. I hope he didn't suffer.'

"We pawed at bloody eyes, breathing deep.

"'But we were long gone by then. Out into the lonely night. Wulfric's power was mine, but so was his *responsibility,* and I was now the last Esana awake to search for that flame. Wulfric's seekers had scattered after his fall, their bonds of blood broken. But I knew their names. Their scent. And in a moldy taverne in the Madeisa sprawl, I found one, legless on whitepoppy, slurring a tale about a girl in Lashaame who healed the dying with her blood. A girl with eyes like long-lost skies, and hair as white as yesteryear snows. And ever Faithful, I set my tread to her side.'

"Dior had sobered now, eyes downturned as she shook her head.

"'Sweet Mothermaid. I'd no idea, Celene. What all this had cost you.'

"'No more than you, mon amie. But as I said, these trials are sent to test us. And in the end, the most important question is the simplest.'

"We pressed one hand to our silent heart.

"'What are you prepared to sacrifice for what you believe?'

"The Grail looked down at her own wounded hand, chewing her lip. The weight of the world on her back. The promise of all she might be and do for others weighed against the thing she wanted for herself. For a girl like Dior Lachance, that was no contest at all.

"'Not even sure where I'm supposed to *wear* a troth ring.'

"She sighed, staring into the gloom.

"'But you're right. Love is for fools.'

"She stood then, and I saw the fire in her still burned. Again I was reminded of those statues outside Cairnhaem. The Redeemer, fierce and fearless, sword in hand, helm encircled with a crown. Her ancestor had died trying to fulfill the dream of uniting heaven and earth. The dream living now in us.

"And we could see despite it all, it lived in her too.

"'Merci, Celene. You're a good friend.'

"'We…'

"We looked to the shadows then. Face hidden behind our mask.

"'I try.'

"Dior smiled, embraced me godmorrow, kissing the porcelain of my cheek. And small, silent, far steadier than when she arrived, the Holy Grail of San Michon departed the library, leaving us in the gloom behind her.

"For long moments we stood motionless. Listening to the voices in our head. Staring into the shadows. Until the shadows moved, stepping forward now, a pale face emerging from that dark, her smile creasing a tiny dimple upon her cherub's cheek.

"*'Well done, Liathe.'*

"Maryn nodded, black eyes gleaming.

“‘*Well done indeed.*’”

VII

SECOND SON

“SEVEN DAYS LATER, Dior was roused by a knock at her door.”

The Liathe rolled her eyes and sighed.

“She was in the bath at the time.”

Celene raised one brow, looking expectantly at the historian across the water. Jean-François was sketching in his tome, pausing now to meet the Liathe’s gaze.

“What, no lewd commentary?” she demanded. “No inquiry about who she was with, or request for a detailed description of what she was wearing?”

“Oh, please. I’m not a *total* pervert.”

The historian frowned.

“… Wait, she was in the bath, what *was* she wearing?”

“Her chambers were richly appointed,” Celene continued. “Palatial in scope as befitted a guest of station, though in truth she never seemed comfortable in them. She’d dismissed the servants the Empress had given her, making her own bed and dressing herself each morn. Our moth kept vigil with her always, save in the hours she visited the great cathedral in Place San Maximille.

“Despite her ancestry, Dior had never struck us as particularly devout, so we were pleased that each dawn and dusk now, and often noon also, she’d begun attending services in Cathédrale de Lumière. Between masses, she spent as much time in the city as she could, tending the sick and mending the broken, Joaquin and her loyal soldiers in tow. The rest of her days she spent training in swordplay with her Unbound, reading the Testaments, and pacing at her balcony with eyes turned ever northward.

“She asked Maryn how affairs with Phoebe and Gabriel fared almost hourly. But the mote our Priori had sent out those many months ago had finally failed, crumbling at last to dust. And though Maryn had sent another, it had yet to arrive at San Maximille. All we knew was that Phoebe had reached Gabriel, intent to steer him from battle with the Forever King. But as to how she’d fared, we’d no clue at all.

“Dior was sunk to her shoulders in near-scalding water when the knock rang on her chamber door. Her blue eyes had been fixed on the steam rising from the bath’s surface, trailing her fingertips through the vapor and watching it dance. But as the knock echoed on the walls, we felt her pulse quicken beneath our tiny feet, our mote hid beneath the damp curls at the nape of her neck as she rose from the tub. Dripping all over the boards, she called ‘*Just a moment!* ’ and hurried across her boudoir. She dressed swiftly in a simple but elegant gown of dove white, stringing her golden wheel about her throat and whispering my brother’s name like a prayer. But it was not the Black Lion of Lorson who stood outside her chambers that cold winter morn, but a lion younger still.

“After a pause for disappointment, Dior dipped into a passable curtsey.

“‘Your Majesty.’

“Philippe de Augustin, son of Alexandre III and Prince of all Elidaen, stood in the hallway, framed by tall windows of snow-frosted glass. He was surrounded by a small army of bodyguards, decked in stout hauberks and tabards of his house.

“The Prince himself was armed with his well-loved longblade, but he wore no armor, clad instead in a fine golden doublet with split scarlet sleeves and leather britches that we suspect most maids would have considered *exactly* the right kind of tight. A heavy crimson cloak lined with wolf fur mantled his broad shoulders, clasped by a brooch set with a unicorn and five swords. His chestnut hair was fresh cropped, cheeks fresh shaved, the scars of battle carved at brow and chin not enough to ruin his portrait.

“‘La demoiselle du Graal,’ he said, bowing from tight-clad hips.

“The pair stared at each other for an age, Dior’s brow rising.

“‘Am I supposed to invite you in?’ she finally asked. ‘I’m new to this royalty thing, admittedly, but that’d be scandalous, wouldn’t it?’

“‘Indeed. Though I confess I’m unsure if you wouldn’t delight in that, mademoiselle. You seem to rather enjoy throwing this court into chaos.’

“The Prince seemed to catch himself, remembering his intent in coming here. Softening his tone, he gestured to the city beyond the windows.

“‘I thought we might walk instead. Talk.’

“Dior glanced to the snow-clad glass. ‘Looks cold out there, Majesty.’

“In one motion, the Prince had whipped off his heavy cloak, draped it about the Grail’s shoulders, and offered his arm with head bowed. He moved with the grace of a dancer, and all the poise of a young gallant raised at court.

“‘Impressive,’ Dior admitted.

“‘No fear, mademoiselle. I still have plenty of time to disappoint.’

“A small smile touched his lips, and Dior’s lips curled ever so slight in kind. She breathed deep, looking again to the windows at the Prince’s back. Clouds were gathering above, the bite of frost now full in the air, the promise of war entwined with it. She knew what was coming with wintersdeep. But for the first time, she had a chance to truly stop it. Looking down at her mangled left hand, she sighed.

“‘Fuck it.’

“And pulling the cloak about her shoulders, she took his arm.

“Side by side, the pair began walking, down the lavish halls of Château Impérial. Dior moved stiff and slow, obviously unnerved to be at this young man’s side. We wondered if she’d ever been touched by a boy in this fashion before. Pursued by one. She’d certainly never *kissed* one, and the notion of weddings and wedding *nights* obviously weighed heavy, dimming her usual brightness. The prince’s guards fell into step a respectful distance back, a flock of Dior’s Unbound tromping behind. All told, the procession counted fifty strong, servants and courtiers stopping to gawp as the pair passed by. But despite his initial request, the Prince said not a word, and finally Dior cleared her throat to fill the void.

“‘So, do w—’

“Philippe glanced her way, and the look in his eyes bid Dior bite her tongue. Onward they walked, down corridors decked with gilt and goldglass, past saluting gens d’armes and through ironclad doors, finally crossing the château drawbridge into Place San Maximille.

“Looking out on the towering statue of the city’s founder, the rushing waterways, the grand plaza usually so thronged, Dior was agawp to see the place utterly deserted.

“‘Where … *is* everybody?’

“Prince Philippe kept walking, bringing the Grail gently with him as his bodyguards fell farther behind. And finally, with a long look at the empty square about them, he spoke.

“‘The Golden Halls of Augustin have no end of ears, Mlle du Graal. And this conversation shall be a delicate one. I had the plaza cleared so we might have privacy.’

“Dior whistled softly. ‘Must be nice to be the Prince.’

“Philippe scoffed. ‘I think you and I both know how the appearance of power and its truths can differ. How those who wield it effortlessly are also beholden to it utterly. And how reality and perception seldom make a harmonious marriage.’

“Dior raised one brow. ‘Fine segue, Prince de Augustin.’

“‘I’m glad it pleased you, Mlle du Graal. I stayed up half the night writing it.’

“Philippe risked a smile, his cheek creased in a small dimple. Dior scoffed softly, hair tumbling over her eyes as she dipped her head. Despite the chill, her skin was sheened with sweat, and though their pace was gentle, her heart thundered like a horse at charge.

“‘You’re trying to be charming now?’

“‘Trying and failing, I take it.’

“‘The only words you’ve had for me since I got here have been hard ones, Majesty.’

“‘Forgive me. But this whole city has been turned on its head by your arrival.’

“‘That was never my intent. And what you said before about me delighting in chaos, that was unfair.’ The Grail looked Prince Philippe up and down, hands curling into fists. ‘I didn’t *ask* for any of this, you know. I was happy enough living in squalor and cutting purses from rich wankers before prophecy reared its ugly fucking head.’

“‘Do you have any brothers, Mlle du Graal? Or sisters?’

“Dior blinked at the odd question, a frown darkening her brow.

“‘No.’

“A pause.

“A sigh.

“‘Well … maybe.’

“She glanced in the direction of the guest wing. Of Reyne’s rooms.

“‘It’s complicated.’

“‘I’d an older brother named Bastien. He was Mother’s favorite. Father’s too. A golden child, beloved of all. Prince of princes. He died when he was fourteen. Heir to the greatest empire on earth, laid low by a simple fever.’ Philippe gazed over the square, voice gone soft. ‘I was the second son. Never intended to sit the Fivefold Throne.’

“‘I’m sure that’s not true,’ Dior said. ‘That he was their favorite, I mean.’

“‘… You have *met* my mother, haven’t you?’

“She scoffed softly, hiding her eyes behind her hair again. ‘The Empress speaks to you unkindly sometimes, I’ll admit. But I find that people treat you the way you *let* them, Majesty. Respect is earned, not owed.’

“‘She is Empress. I am her loyal subject. And … not overly fond of conflict with her.’

“‘You’re a *knight*. How many battles have you fought? How many foes conquered?’

“‘I wear the mantle of soldier now, but not always. In fact, before heirdom was foisted upon me, I was studying to join the priesthood, if you’ll believe it.’

"Dior looked him up and down again, pale lips pursed. Prince Philippe was tall. Strong. Fine. Hardened by battle and scarred by trials.

"'I can no more imagine you in a priest's skirt than me, Majesty.'

"He smiled, and this time she joined in. 'And that is my point. None of us get to choose the hand that God deals us, do we?'

"'… No, we don't.'

"'Nor the duty that comes with it, Mlle du Graal.'

"She hung her head, her voice barely a murmur.

"'If this is going where I think it's going … you should probably call me Dior.'

"'And where do you think it is going, Dior?'

"She met Philippe's eyes then, swallowing the lump we could hear in her throat.

"'Let's just stroll for a spell, oui?'

"'As you wish.'

"And arm in arm, Prince and Grail walked on.

"They crossed a bridge wrought of marble, into the square proper. Snow was tumbling from iron clouds, and there was no sound save the frost beneath their heels, the soft laughter of the canal rushing below. Dior stopped, extricating herself from the Prince's arm and peering over the railing, breath rising in white plumes from her lips.

"'Where does all this water *come* from, anyway?'

"Philippe blinked, surprised at her curiosity; we doubted the femmes he usually dealt with had much interest in the working of Augustin's waterways. But glancing to the statue in the square's heart, he nodded. 'Maximille's great-great-*great*-grandson, Henri the Stonehand, designed this capital to withstand the grimmest siege. We pump water up from the Béni, so our citizens have a fresh supply even if our walls are surrounded.'

"'What happens when the pumps freeze?'

"'They do not.' Philippe nodded southward across the city, columns of smoke rising into cold skies. 'Yonder lies the Ironmongers' Guildworks. La Rivière de Fer. The forges burn hotter than any in the empire, and we divert some of their heat into the pumpworks beside them, to keep the canals flowing all year round.'

"'Sounds … complicated.'

"'Henri was a genius,' Philippe said. 'Of all my ancestors, he deserves the most acclaim and gets the least. Strange how history gives so much renown to destroyers and so little to creators. It was Maximille the Martyr who began conquest of this empire. His son and grandson, Philippe I and Maximille II, completed the task. But it was Henri who truly began to *build* something here. A legacy that would endure beyond any emperor. Some say Galerie Royale is the greatest marvel of this city. Others Cathédrale de Lumière or Rue des Étoiles. If you ask me, it is the River of Iron.'

"He looked at her sidelong, thoughtful.

"'Would you like to see it?'

"'A smithy? You surely do know how to impress a girl, Majesty.'

"Philippe's face was stern, but we could see some small flicker of amusement deep in the sapphire of his eyes. 'It will be warmer there at least.'

"'See, *now* you're just trying to get me to fall in love with you.'

"'That would be fine.' He crooked his elbow. 'But unnecessary, I assure you.'

"And with a sigh, Dior took his arm.

"Over the canal bridge they walked, through the empty square. The soldiers barring the way to the plaza stepped aside at the Prince's command, and the pair entered the streets of Augustin's noble quarter beyond. Philippe's men kept a cordon around the couple, but they were among the hoi polloi now, and folk whispered as they passed, smiles bright at the sight of them together. You'd have been hard-pressed to find a single soul in that city who did not sing the praises of the Maiden of the Grail, but it seemed this young warrior prince had no shortage of admirers either. The citizens of Augustin, the citizens of the *empire,* stood on the verge of a battle for their future. And seeing this pair together promised a brighter one than they'd imagined in years.

"But still …

"'I take it you are uncomfortable with thought of our union, Dior.'

"The Grail's jaw clenched at that word, and we felt her suppress a shiver.

"'I'm not turning cartwheels about it.'

"Philippe smiled, nodding to a passel of holy sisters. His face was a mask, pleasant, pretty, belying the iron in his voice. 'And yet it was your own counselor who suggested the notion. My mother was displeased to be pressed so openly by Princess á Maergenn. I'd suggest she seek some lessons in etiquette when her kinswoman Duchess Yvaine arrives from Daggercoast. She made a rather powerful enemy that night.'

"'You sound frightened of your mama.'

"'You should be too.'

"'And yet here you are. Here *we* are.'

"Philippe waved as a young lad called out blessings.

"'There are many factions in the Golden Halls, Dior. Not all are fond of my mother. She was far younger than my father when they wed. Some whispered she bewitched him. Nonsense, of course, but the rumor has resurfaced since the Emperor went to God's arms. A great many in court are wondering if it is time for the Empress to … step aside.'

"She met his eyes at that.

"'I'm sorry, by the way,' Dior said. 'About your papa. I lost my mama to sickness too. I know what it feels like to watch someone you care about wasting away day by day. Makes you feel small. Helpless. I *hated* that.'

"Philippe stopped walking. Studying Dior's face. And, brushing the surface of his thoughts, we could feel the soft bewilderment in him. Here they were, dancing around the most pivotal political decision this empire had probably ever known. This was treachery. Perhaps treason. And she was talking about *feelings*. And though he supposed this might be some play at false compassion, looking closer, he realized she *was* genuinely grieved for him. That was one of the wonders of Dior Lachance. Despite the hurt she'd endured in her life, she never closed herself off to it, nor to others. And Philippe saw the truth of her then. The same I had seen. The reason she worked so tirelessly among the wounded in the days after the attack. The reason she'd risked so much coming here. It was not to leech acclaim or garner influence or because she coveted fame or power or even a throne.

"It was because Dior Lachance cared.

"*Truly* cared.

"'My father was not a perfect man,' Philippe said. 'But he stood tall against a darkness none of his forebears ever faced. And he taught me to do the same.'

"'I wish I could've met him.'

"The Grail looked down at her hand then, sighing.

"'I wish I could've saved him.'

"The Prince frowned. If the Grail had come earlier to the capital, healed the Emperor of his illness, her path to the Fivefold Throne would have proved even more difficult than now. And yet, looking into her eyes …

"'I believe you,' he said.

"And on they walked.

"Through the noble district, along Rue des Étoiles and into the Quartier de la Guilde. A crowd was gathered around them now, following as they strolled, Dior's Unbound looking ill at ease in the growing crush. But the Prince's guard was used to keeping onlookers at bay, and though slow, their pace led them steady and sure toward a column of dark smoke rising into winter skies.

"Dior's nose wrinkled. 'What's that *smell*?'

"'Coke and coal. Iron and sulfur and sweat.'

"'*Very* romantic.'

"Philippe smiled, though as they walked on, it slowly faded.

"'I feel I should be honest, Dior. I believe you've the best of intentions here. There is a great deal of support among the nobility and army for union between us. I am of Augustin blood, and you, beloved of the people. But as for romance…'

"He pursed his lips, meeting her gaze.

"'Were I to ask for your hand, I'd not be offering you my heart.'

"'… It belongs to another,' Dior realized.

"'She will cause no strife. She understands. What I am, and where my duty lies.'

"Dior shook her head and smiled. 'Well, aren't we a pair?'

"'Your young capitaine? I see the way he looks at you.'

"Dior followed Philippe's eyeline, finding a pretty dark-haired lad among the guards.

"'*Joaquin*? Oh *L*—'

"She stumbled in her denial then, perhaps recalling Reyne's words after the feast.

"*Unnatural.*

"'Alas,' she said. 'I've a weakness for good cheekbones and bad poetry.'

"'We can approach this with maturity. I would still perform all husbandly duties, of course. We would be expected to produce an heir as soon as possible, so you must set your man aside for a time. But once our sons arrive, there is no reason you could n—'

"He blinked, placing his hand over hers.

"'Are you well?'

"Dior shook her head, white as old snows. 'Just … feeling sick. The smell…'

"'We can leave if you wish?'

"She looked at the grand foundry, the waterworks beside it rising through the haze of steam and mist before them. 'No turning back now.'

"On they walked, along snow-clad cobbles toward the Ironmongers' Guildworks. La Rivière de Fer was a grand structure of well-wrought stone in the heart of the Guild Quarter. Solid bronze doors loomed twenty feet high, embossed with images of smiths at work. A basalt statue of Eloise, Angel of Retribution, stood beside them, a font of holy water in her hands. Beside the foundry loomed the Augustin pumpworks; a twisted nest of tanks and pipes and bellows that constituted the greatest engineering works in the empire. The buildings were grubby, vast, spewing plumes of smoke into the heavens. The smell *was* a touch foul, but not enough to have Dior as pale as she looked.

"The ironmongers and waterworkers had obviously got word of the Prince's coming, and the young couple were met at the doors by a dozen guildmasters. Dior was introduced to each, smiling politely as the Prince explained she'd expressed an interest in the canals. And dipping her hand into the font, the Grail followed the procession inside.

"She did her best to listen as she was taken on a tour of the works—or at least, so it appeared to us. She was led through towering furnaces, past smoke-stained men straining at coalfaces, sweating lads working at vast pumps, all stopping to stare in wonder. Down a river of molten steel through the foundry's heart, into an impressive tangle of iron pipes and gantries and clouds of steam, lit the color of flame by those burning forges. But the whole time, we could practically hear the Prince's words echoing in her skull, teeth grinding, hands clenching at the thought.

"*Husbandly duties.*

"'Have you any questions, Mlle du Graal?'

"Dior blinked as if waking from a trance, looking at the smiling men before her. She and Philippe and the guildmasters were stood in a long hall overlooking the entire foundry. Beyond the windows, through the fiery glow and clouds of vapor, the pumpworks wound upon itself like a nest of serpents, great tanks of water siphoned up from the river beneath, heated by that river of iron. In truth, these works *were* the wonder the prince had promised, but the marvel seemed lost on Dior at the time. Her hair was damp with steam, hung like a veil over her eyes as she replied.

"'I…'

"She shook her head.

"'No. Very informative, seigneurs. Merci.'

"'Your pardon, messieurs,' Philippe said. 'I'd speak to the lady in private if I may.'

"The guildmasters murmured blessings and departed with a flurry of bows, leaving Dior and the Prince as alone as they'd likely ever manage—surrounded by a cadre of armed guards and Unbound. Joaquin was watching Dior intently, and the surface of his thoughts were a storm of ardor and fear and hope. We knew the Prince was no fool, that the houndboy of Aveléne and many of her guards *did* look at Dior with love. But Philippe had mistaken adoration for infatuation. Adulation for affection. For though his devotion was absolute, Joaquin Marenn loved Dior Lachance the way the mountains love the moons.

"Eternally, and forever apart.

"Dior walked to the windows, hand to the glass.

"'Apologies,' Philippe said. 'I'd not have brought you here if I knew you'd be so bored.'

"'No, it *is* interesting. Just…'

"Dior turned to the Prince, shrugging.

"'Not really what I expected from all this.'

"'Nor I. I'd meant to have this conversation in the square. I confess, I'm not quite certain what to make of you, Dior. You're rather unlike most of the demoiselles I've known.'

"'Well, I've not known any princes at *all,* so…'

"They smiled weakly, silence hung now between them beneath the groan of the pumps, the hiss of the bellows, the song of steel on steel.

"'I suppose this place is more appropriate than most,' she sighed. 'It's not pretty. But it serves a greater purpose. Like our marriage would.'

"The Prince nodded, taking a few steps to her side.

"'It need not be entirely loveless. Nor bloodless.'

"'The Forever King and his Endless Legion are going to do everything in their power to stop it happening. So, no. It'll be far from bloodless, Majesty.'

"'If this is going where I think it's going … you should probably call me Philippe.'

"She looked up into his eyes then.

"'And where do you think it's going, Philippe?'

"The Prince held out his hand, sapphire eyes fixed on ice blue.

"'Would you do me the honor of becoming my bride, Dior?'

"She looked at him, stood amid the ironsong and scent of smoke. This prince of a city at the edge of the abyss. This second son never intended to rule. This thing she never asked for. Never *ever* wanted.

"'None of us get to choose the hand that God deals us, do we?'

"'No, we don't,' Philippe replied.

"'Nor the duty that comes with it.'

"He nodded, smiling soft.

"'Aren't we a pair?'

"With not a smile, but a sigh, she took his hand.

"'I suppose we are.'"

VIII

DARKEST HOUR

“‘*VICTORY.*’

“Such was Maryn’s hiss, slipping from her lips as she strode into the library. We looked up from the Testaments we were pretending to read, head tilted.

“‘Priori?’

“‘*We say* victory, *Liathe.*’

“She swept across the room, nun’s skirts whispering, taking our hands in hers and squeezing so tight we winced at the pain.

“‘*Did ye not hear? Not see? The Prince hath proposed matrimony to the Grail, and thanks to thy wise and learned counsel, Dior hath accepted! One step nearer to the union of heaven and earth. One step closer to the fruition of Illia’s dream.*’ She looked skyward then, and I saw her eyes filmed with bloody tears. ‘*Praise be to thee, O Lord of Love, O God of Blood. All glory unto thy throne, O King of Wolf and Lamb.*’

“We blinked then, realizing that just as we, Mother Maryn must have a mote of herself secreted somewhere near Dior. Watching. Listening. But if she had a mote near the Grail, and had *also* sent one north to find Phoebe, that meant that unlike us, Maryn must be able to see through more than one set of eyes. Command more than one mote at a time. That unsettled me slightly, I admit. We were but new to the power of the Esana, but Maryn had wielded it for *centuries*. She could pierce thoughts with a glance. Crush steel with a shrug. Wield blood like a maestro. Her power was such that in the coming battle, she might well be the difference between victory and defeat.

"But what else was she capable of? How many sets of eyes did she have hidden about this palace? How much did she see? How much did she know?

"'Véris,' we whispered.

"*'We are* close, *Celene. Closer than we have been since before Charbourg's fall.'*

"'There is still the matter of my brother. Dior trusts him more than *anyone*. If Gabriel returns with an army in tow and bends her ear against us, all could be undone.'

"Maryn smiled at that, black gaze unreadable.

"*'Patience, Liathe. And prepare thyself. To do what needs be done.'*

"Maryn would say no more. Over the next few nights, our Priori remained within her chamber, emerging only to feed. Our morsel of blood was still delivered every dusk by one of Dior's Unbound, but the hunger in us was worsening. We'd meant to speak to Dior about it, but news of her betrothal had swept the palace by then, and she was kept long from our side. The bells of Cathédrale de Lumière sang for an entire *day* when the engagement was announced to the people, and Dior's hours were filled with councils and fittings and lessons. She sent Joaquin to Maryn constantly, demanding news of Gabriel and Phoebe, asking if the mother's mote had yet reached San Maximille. Always she gave the same reply.

"*'Patience, holy child.'*

"*'Patience.'*

"On the third night Maryn came to us, deep in the still past the witching hour. We were in the library again, reading from the Book of Vows, trying to still the disquiet in our mind. Wulfric loomed *large* those nights, his shadow seething, pacing silently behind the walls of our eyes. He spoke little, but I felt him often, as if he too were gripped with the fervor I saw now in Maryn, stepping from the shadows with a secret smile at her lips.

"*'It is time.'*

"We rose soundlessly, the look in Maryn's eyes brooking no question. And to the cold, silent hearth in the dining hall, we followed her steps. Though we were 'guests' of the Empress, we were not trusted to privacy in our sumptuous cells—Inquisitorial troops made regular patrols to ensure that we remained firmly where Her Grace Isabella had put us. But though the churchmen were thorough, they were also creatures of habit, and their visits came regularly with each tolling of the hour.

"*'We have until twobells,'* Maryn said. '*Fly swift.*'

"With the sound of tearing cloth, whispering wings, Maryn burst apart. Her swarm of moths fluttered about us in a red haze before turning, rolling, fluttering up the chimney above the cold hearth. And shifting, ripping, tearing apart at our seams, we followed, up the soot-clad way of that cold chimney and into the waiting night.

"The snow was knives, the wind was hungry; the howling harbingers of wintersdeep. Through our myriad eyes, we could see all Augustin below us. The marbled beauty of Rive Cœur, Cathédrale de Lumière and Château Impérial, La Rivière de Fer and the glittering Rue des Étoiles. Over the city walls we swept; those grand battlements bristling with cannon and guarded by thousands of brave soldiers, north toward a great span of stone. It had been one of seven once, Pont de Clementine its name, after the faithful wife of Maximille I. But now, the folk of Augustin simply called it Lastbridge.

"It spanned the River Béni, the only path from the city. Its great gatehouses had been repaired, Augustin's finest charged with its defense. We could still see those barrels of black ignis lashed beneath the arches, ready to blow rather than allow the Forever King to cross. But the Béni was freezing swiftly now, wintersdeep ice, and when Fabién came again, we knew Lastbridge would not be his only road into the city.

"Onward we flew, ever in Maryn's wake, over the broken bones of Rive Nord. Some small attempt had been made to repair the outer walls here, and a brave garrison stood the watch. But the city's northern shore was all but deserted as we flew over it, Place San Antoine echoing with the sound of our battle there; Reyne's cry and Dior's howl and Kestrel's promise to Maryn, our Priori's vow in turn.

"*All Shall Kneel.*

"*Judgment Comes*.

"Over the fields beyond the walls; vast farmlands that once grew wheat and corn and sprouts, now given over to fungus and potato. We'd been flying for a spell now, and we began to fear we'd not return in time for the patrol when Maryn descended, a tiny crimson tempest, spiraling down beneath the rotten boughs and leafless eaves of a fungus-riddled deadwood some twenty miles from the city. And in a clearing of fallen trees and broken stone, she alighted, coalescing with us beside her, together and alone.

"But not for long.

"'*Come forth,*' she commanded. '*Fiáin dahtr.*'

"From the shadows she stirred, her scent reaching us now; sweat and scrub, mud and blood. As Phoebe stepped from the dark beneath the trees, her eyes gleamed like topaz, golden trinkets singing as her braids shifted in the wind. We saw she was muddied by long miles, wearied by longer trials, and that the curse of her blood had worsened. With every dance, a child of the Moonsthrone ran the risk of their beast leaving a mark upon them, and we saw Phoebe had paid a price for her latest waltz; in addition to the pointed ears and cat's shadow and hunter's eyes, beneath the hem of her clancloth skirts we could see a *tail* now, long and furred in the fashion of a lioness.

"Our lips curled at the mark of idolatrous magiks upon her flesh. Phoebe's gods were not ours, nor her allegiance. And so we were astounded as she walked from the gloom, and with head bowed low, sank to one knee before Maryn.

"'Mistress,' she whispered.

"We looked to our Priori, realization sinking into our chest like a knife.

"'You…'

"We blinked, looking again at that proud warrior of the Moonsthrone, that slayer of countless kith, that daughter of Moons and Earth, down on her knee in the mud.

"'You *thralled* her.'

"*'Of course,'* Maryn replied. '*Think ye we would entrust the Sainted Blade to a hand we did not wield? Think ye we would risk Dior drawing counsel from lips godless?* '

"'… When?'

"*'Aboard* Dawnseeker. *In nights after we departed Dún Maergenn. A moth from our wrist, dissolved into her drink each day until the deed was done. Dior's Unbound are immune to our touch, thanks to the blessing of her blood. But the Dahtr á Dúnnsair hath never partaken of the Grail's veins. And save wounded by silver, nor shall she ever need to. The perfect hand. Be that not aright, Fiáin dahtr?* '

"'Aye, Mistress.'

"Our mind was in tumult at this, our heart sinking. We'd little fondness for Dúnnsair, nor she for us. But the sight of her on her knees …

"*'What news, brave Phoebe?* '

"'The deed is done, Mother.'

"From within her clancloth, the fleshwitch produced a familiar sword in a beaten scabbard. With the crisp song of steel, Phoebe drew Ashdrinker from her sheath and thrust the weapon into the snow. We were forced to admire her beauty—the blade of an angel, wrought in the Empyrean Forge by Evangeline herself. Our eyes roamed the sigils upon the blade's curve, up, up to the silvered dame upon the hilt. Her arms were outstretched as if to embrace us. Her face smiling, as if pleased to see us.

"We doubted she truly was.

"'Gabriel *gave* you his sword?'

"'Nae,' Phoebe replied, meeting our eyes. 'I tried to convince him, but he'd nae be swayed from vengeance. So, I took the blade before he had opportunity to lose it.'

"'… You *stole* it?'

"She smiled then, tail switching from side to side. 'He was compensated.'

"'If you stole his blade, then he'll surely be coming after it?'

"Maryn shook her head. '*Such was his hubris, the Black Lion pressed his attack, even without his blade. We watched through our mote, high upon the winds, as he crashed against San Maximille's walls. His troops were sore blooded, and he blooded Voss deep in turn. But at the last, at the very cusp of Voss's* *throat, thy kinsman fell.*’

“My heart sank at that. Thinking back on all our years together. Our youth, thick as thieves, fighting imaginary foes about Papa’s forge. Our journey with Dior, our betrayals and battles, confessions and contritions. And our voice trembled as I whispered.

“‘My brother is dead?’

“‘*Worse. Gabriel de León hath pledged allegiance to Fabién Voss.*’

“Our eyes narrowed, our voice a hiss. ‘Voss *murdered* Gabriel’s wife and child. Why in God’s name would he throw in his lot with the monster he vowed to destroy?’

“‘*His daughter be not dead, Liathe, but Dead. He hath cast aside all loyalty for her.*’

“We withered down to our haunches then, dragging hands back through our hair.

“‘Oh, Gabriel…’

“‘*No matter,*’ Maryn declared. ‘*Through the goodly work of brave Phoebe, the Sainted Blade be ours. The wedding day be set. All pieces are ’pon the board, and the game hath swung in our favor. We hath need only to defend Augustin from the Voss until the Feast of the Maid. After that…*’

“‘Forgive me, Mistress,’ Phoebe said. ‘But we’ve a trouble.’

“‘*Speak its name and see it remedied.*’

“‘Ashdrinker.’

“We blinked, gaze falling once more upon the Sainted Blade. She was thrust point down in the snow, gleaming in the gloom. I was the daughter of a blacksmith, remember. No stranger to the troubles of steel. We could see a slight imperfection now; a crack, begun at her broken tip, and traveling partway along her length.

“‘She’s damaged. But it seems she’s been repaired?’

“‘I speak nae of condition, but disposition,’ Phoebe replied. ‘The Ashdrinker can speak to any who wield her, Mistress. And if Dior must take her up to be crowned…’

“‘*She shall sing of thy treachery to the Grail.*’

“‘Mebbe. The damage Gabe did to her when he tried to slay Fabién has left Ash of scattered mind. She’s flighty, like. Some days sharp as her edge, others a babe lost in the woods. After I stole her, she vowed vengeance for my betrayal, cursed and screamed at me the whole night. Next dawn, she forgot who the hell I even *was*. Hour to hour, she might demand to be returned to Gabriel, sing a bawdy song, act as if we’re best of friends. But if she collects herself enough when we give her to Dior…’

“‘*Scattered mind, ye say.*’

“Maryn’s eyes roamed Ashdrinker’s length, hard as iron.

“‘*Prophecy deems only that the blade be present as the thrones of heaven and earth are united,*’ she declared. ‘*Not that it be whole. And if so small a crack* *hath scattered her mind, it should not take much more to shatter it.*’

“Phoebe and I exchanged a glance at that. The Ashdrinker was blessed of heaven, and neither Maryn nor myself could touch her without burning our hands to cinders. Though Phoebe was bound to the Mother, still she cared for Gabriel, and those *he* cared for in kind. If Maryn was asking what we *thought* she was asking …

“But rather than looking to Phoebe, the Mother turned her black gaze on us.

“‘*See to it, Liathe.*’

“‘… See to what, Mother?’

“‘*The shattering.*’

“We looked to Ashdrinker, that silvered dame yet smiling upon the hilt.

“‘Why us? We cannot touch her, w—’

“‘*A display of loyalty. Sweet Phoebe’s hath already been assured in blood. But we move toward crescendo now, Celene. We must be assured of fidelity. Asked ye, did we not, if we could count ’pon thee in darkest hour to come?* ’

“‘You did.’

“‘*Assure us, did ye not, we could rely ’pon thee to do what must be done?* ’

“‘… We did.’

“‘*This be that darkest hour.*’

“Again we looked to Phoebe, and imprisoned behind the chains of blood between her and Maryn, we could yet see the heartbreak in her eyes. Slow horror dawned on her face as we slipped off our greatcoat, wrapped it about our hands to protect them. The wind was razors, but we felt no chill at all until we closed our fingers about Ashdrinker’s hilt.”

Deep in the bowels of Sul Adair, the Last Liathe fell silent. Jean-François fixed his eyes across the river, saw she was sat cross-legged on the oil-washed stone, rocking softly back and forth. The elation of the wine-laced blood she’d drunk had faded, leaving her as it left many; melancholy and muddied with regret.

And as she lifted her gaze to his, the historian saw bloody tears in her eyes.

“She was *singing,*” Celene whispered. “And I knew not how nor why, but she sang the same hymn I’d heard my Laurent play, my first night in San Yves. The same I’d sung as a child in our chapel in Lorson, Mama and Papa and Amélie and Gabriel beside me.

“*To Thee, My Heart.*

“But her song faltered as she felt my touch. And into the silence now ringing between us, she spoke, her voice a glittering hymn in my mind.

“*I know ye. Thou art m-m-my Lion’s Hellion. My Gabriel’s d-d-dear Celene. And if thou art kin to m-m-my brotherbrother, thou art also kin t-t-to me.*

“I made no reply, only tightening my grip, glancing now to Maryn.

“*Ye need not d-do this, sister.*

"I looked into Ashdrinker's eyes, then. That silvered maid upon the hilt. I could hear notes of fear in the song of her voice, notes of sadness, notes of pain.

"Not for her, I think now.

"For *me.*

"*I have watched ye struggle,* she told me. *Have seen ye b-b-bleed. Yet for all the pain thou hast suffered, the blood thou hast spilt, the lies thou hast told, in thy heartheartheart v-v-virtue hath e'er abided. Ask thyselfself now, be this deed righteous? B-b-be it just?*

"Still I said nothing, looking to the clearing about me, the stone piled at its heart.

"Broken granite. Jagged edge.

"*Think ye Dior shall thank thee for this? Gabriel forgive thee? G-G-God shrive thee?*

"'*Do it,*' Maryn commanded.

"*In thy heart, ye know this b-be sin, sister.*

"I raised the blade above our head, teeth bared in a gasping, heaving snarl. Ashdrinker weighed as heavy as the entire world at that moment. But I knew *that* was what hung in the balance here. Not just *my* soul, but the fate of every soul on this earth.

"*Celene, p-please do n—*

"We brought the blade down on the rocks, hard as we could, the flat of her smashed against that jagged granite spur. The song of metal and splintering stone rang bright in the night. But Ashdrinker was forged of sterner stuff than mere steel, and rather than crack her, the blow simply enraged her, her song now become a scream.

"*UNHAND ME, VILLAIN!*

"Echoing in our skull, silver-sharp and splitting as we raised her high again.

"*F-F-F-FAITHLESS SWINE! BASEBORN WRETCH, FILTHY NOT M-M-MMY HILT WITH—*

"We brought her down again. And again. And *again.* With each blow, sparks flew in the dark, stone crumbling, Phoebe flinching, Ashdrinker's screams ringing louder and fiercer in my skull. But at the fourth strike, her pitch shifted, discordant and warped now.

"*T-tt-ttake thy sty stickstickstick—*

"Again we brought her down on the stone.

"*Once I had a b-b-brrrother, and we would play pretendofknights and b-b-blades—*

"Again.

"*S-s-s-stop, p-p-puh—*

"Again.

"Again.

“*Again.*

“*G-G-Gabriel—*

“Phoebe stood still and silent, but as I continued smashing Ashdrinker upon those stones, I saw the fleshwitch was crying, shoulders shaking in silent sobs. In that moment I realized *I* was weeping also, what little blood I had in me spilling down my cheeks.

“*Four tablespspspspoons of b-b-buhbuhbutter …*

“There was no song in Ashdrinker’s voice now. No silver left at all. Just rust and ruin and regret, a choir so far out of tune it ceased to be music at all.

“*TovrEM ma’da? So voTHVOthvOth sAn’et?*

“I stopped hurting her, looking now upon the blade in my hands. The welds in her spine were broken open. The crack at her tip now driven all the way to her root.

“*FoURf-f-FOUrfour taBLEspoOns …*

“Her voice faded to a whisper, but still she smiled as she looked at me.

“*whO ARe y-y-YOu?*

“I dropped the blade into the snow, hand gone numb, stilling her voice in my skull. And into that ringing silence, empty as tombs, Maryn spoke instead.

“‘*Evil ye are. Lest evil ye be.*’

“We swallowed thick, ashes on our tongue as we stared at the broken blade. And in that starsteel, in the place my reflection should’ve been, I saw my master’s face.

“‘No more than the monster he made me.’”

IX

ONE MORE TASTE OF HEARTBREAK

"'WHAT THE *FUCK* are you talking about?'

"Dior was stood in her boudoir, dressed in her dawnmass best, pale blue eyes gone wide and wild. It was the morn of the deed, that broken silver song still ringing in my skull, refusing to leave me be. Maryn and I had been roused in the predawn dark by our guards informing us of that which we were already fully aware: Phoebe á Dúnnsair had returned to Augustin at last, and the Grail had demanded our presence.

"Joaquin was already with Dior, and the Princess á Maergenn soon joined us, gifting Phoebe a long and tearful embrace. We'd stood silent as the fleshwitch recounted her tale, but Maryn and I already knew it—the details concocted yestereve. In Phoebe's version of events, she'd not stolen Ashdrinker, nor fled before the battle of San Maximille. Instead, she'd been with Gabriel as he charged the Forever King's fortifications.

"'You told him I was alive?' Dior whispered.

"'Aye,' Phoebe nodded. 'But buoyed up on duskdancer blood, armed with the sainted blade, we'd all believed Gabriel capable of slaying Fabién. Yet at the last…'

"The duskdancer shook her head, tears glittering in hunter's eyes.

"'He f-failed, Flower.'

"Dior clenched her teeth, staring the fleshwitch down.

"'What do you mean *failed*? He's the greatest swordsman in the realm, armed with the sword of an angel and the blood of the Holy fucking Grail!'

"'Nae man of woman born may slay the Forever King.'

"Dior breathed unsteady, lashes brimming as she whispered.

"'What *happened*?'

"'He fought like a demon. He fought for ye, for all of us … Moons, he was *brilliant,* Dior.' Phoebe breathed deep, crying now. 'But even graced with yer holy blood, Ashdrinker could nae best the iron of the Forever King's skin. Rather than piercing it, she broke upon it.'

"'Shit,' Dior hissed. 'And Gabe? Oh *God* p-please, tell me he's aright, Phoebe…'

"'He lives. But…'

"'But what? Goddamn you, fucking *speak*!'

"'He surrendered, Flower. Gabriel bent his knee to the Forever King.'

"Dior shook her head, tears falling like rain.

"'I don't believe you. No, nono, I don't fucking *believe* you, Gabe would *never* surrender to that bastard! There's no way a man who lost the wife and daughter he loved more than *life* would kneel to the monster who took them away!'

"'He gave them back, Dior. One o' them anyway.'

"The Grail stood mute, bewildered and trembling.

"'Patience,' Phoebe sighed. 'That poor wee bairn is *become,* Dior. Broodchild of the Lord of the Ironhearts. Eighth Prince of Forever. And fer the chance to be with her again, his own flesh and blood, his *true* daughter…'

"The fleshwitch hung her head.

"'Gabriel set all others aside.'

"A sob bubbled at Dior's lips, her face crumpling.

"'No. No, he *promised.* He p-promised he'd never leave m-me.'

"'I'm sorry, Flower.'

"'He *PROMISED*!'

"The scream rang upon the walls, in the empty halls of my heart, my eyes downturned as Dior withered to the floor. Reyne rushed to her side, murmuring comforts, smoothing the tears from Dior's cheeks. But the Grail snarled at Phoebe now.

"'Why didn't you stop him?'

"'Dior, I—'

"'Why didn't you *STOP* HIM, PHOEBE?' she roared, rising back to her feet. 'I was here *waiting* for him! I *trusted* you! I *needed* you!'

"'I'm sorry, Flower.'

"'*Sorry?* You're fucking *SORRY*? Sorry doesn't bring my fa—'

"She caught herself then, spit hissing between clenched teeth, arms wrapped tight about herself. And turning to the bureau beside her, she dragged her hands across it, crystal carafes and tumblers and vases all sent flying, crashing, smashing upon the floor. Joaquin looked on with anguish, Reyne's face twisted with sorrow as Dior screamed again; a scream of such grief and heartbreak and *loneliness* it almost made us weep with her. Through every trial upon her road, the vow my brother made her had been Dior's guiding star. The mountain she set her back against. That no matter how dark it got, how hopeless it seemed, there was one man in this empire who would never abandon her.

"'In the fleshwitch's defense,' we murmured, 'there is very little under heaven that can convince my brother to avert himself from a course already plotted.'

"Phoebe glanced to me at that. We could tell she was torn asunder here—the allegiance to her friend, to the *truth,* overshadowed yet not full-swallowed by the Mother's blood. She could not betray Maryn. But nor could she be happy about being forced to lie to the girl she loved.

"'This is not Phoebe's fault, Dior,' I said.

"'Well, now we're fucked!' she cried. 'With Ashdrinker lost, there's no way to part the veil anymore! All this was for *nothing*! We're fucking *done*!'

"'I told ye she was broken, Flower. Nae lost. When Gabriel lay down his sword and took his daughter in his arms, I snatched up the blade.' Phoebe glanced to the Mother then, torment writ in gold and tears. 'Though I've failed ye, I hope this might make amends.'

"Talons gleaming, Phoebe drew that beaten scabbard from her clancloth. And with eyes downturned, she proffered the sword to the Grail. Dior's rage dimmed a touch, a faint flame of hope rekindled. But we saw that hope dulled by grief as she slipped the blade from her sheath and saw the damage done. Fresh tears spilled from her eyes as they roamed that terrible crack, splitting the sword all the way to her hilt, and I understood the root of her sorrow. Dior Lachance and Ashdrinker had slain Danton Voss together. Carved their names into the pages of legend, formed a bond none might sunder. And to see the blade in such a state was a bitter draught to swallow.

"One more taste of heartbreak.

"'Oh, my poor Ash, what's happened to you…'

"She ran gentle fingers over the silvered dame, lower lip trembling.

"'I know, mon amie. I know.'

"Maryn stirred, speaking for the first time since we arrived.

"'*It yet speaks to thee? What doth it say?* '

"'She's sad,' Dior whispered. '*So* sad. But … she's not making sense.'

"She kissed the hilt, silvered lips to hers as she sheathed the blade.

"'Hush now. Sleep. All will be well, Ash.'

"We heard desolation in that whisper, hanging our head.

"'I p-promise.'

"'We must warn Prince Philippe of this, Dior.'

"All eyes turned to Joaquin, gazing in pain at the girl he adored.

"'The Black Lion's army was factored into Augustin's defense. If we're to be short so great a number, plans will need to be redrawn. And *miracles* prayed for.’

“‘My sister and her husband bring fresh troops from Daggercoast,’ Reyne said. ‘And more vassals arrive every day from the south. Don’t lose faith, Joaquin.’

“‘We’ve faith aplenty, Princess. What we’re short of is *twenty thousand men*.’ The houndboy turned to the fleshwitch. ‘A host of duskdancers could fill that hole twice over. Have you any word from Brynne or Angiss about the Moonsthrone army?’

“‘None a’tall,’ Phoebe replied. ‘Aunt Cinna was to speak to the All Mothers on our behalf. She’d have *surely* done so by now. If she’d kenned Dior was a true daughter of the Moonsthrone, they’d have been swayed fer certain. But without that knowin’…’

“‘Can we get word to them?’

“‘*How?* I’m to sprout wings from arse and fuckin’ fly there?’

“‘Are all the de León soldiers lost?’ Reyne asked softly. ‘No survivors at all?’

“‘Dinnae ken,’ Phoebe muttered. ‘I took the blade and never looked back.’

“*‘E’en if some did survive, they cannot be trusted.’* Maryn gazed about the room, voice gone cold and grim. ‘*If the Black Lion or any of his capitaines lived through San Maximille, they must be viewed as enemies now. Fabién Voss be not above slaving those dearest to us to his dark will. He will do* anything *to stop us parting the veil.*’

“‘He’ll not kill Dior,’ Joaquin replied. ‘Of that we’re certain, at least.’

“*‘Think ye so, brave soldier of the light? ’*

“Reyne’s eyes narrowed at that. ‘You truly think he’d…’

“*‘Fabién Voss united kith of four bloodlines attempting to destroy Illia’s dream at Charbourg. He will stop at* nothing *to extinguish it completely. And if offered choice between seizing Dior or ensuring this darkness endures eternal, who can say what he will sacrifice? ’* Black eyes swept the room, pinning all to the floor. ‘*We must keep careful watch, children. Gabriel de León and his cadre can no longer be counted among our allies. Sleepless and constant must be our vigil. Nothing matters, save the safekeeping of our holy charge.*’

“Maryn walked to Dior’s side, sinking to her knees.

“*‘For the Grail.’*

“‘For the Grail,’ Joaquin replied, kneeling now.

“‘For the Grail,’ Reyne and Phoebe declared.

“We bowed low, afraid to meet Dior’s eyes lest she see the lie in them.

“‘For the Grail.’

“Dior said nothing, looking to the sword in her hands. The silence stretched into the uncomfortable, and none knew how to fill it. Joaquin finally murmured of reporting to the Prince and quietly took his leave. Phoebe kissed Dior’s brow and went in search of food and hot water to wash away the sins of her road. Maryn and Reyne locked eyes; a silent battle of wills. But the Mother relented with a smile, and glancing to me, gestured we should leave.

"At least most of us …

"The Princess stood alone with Dior after we departed, crackling flames in the hearth the only sound. The Grail looked hollowed out and worn thin; so many losses added to her tally, we wondered how many more she could bear. The dim light of daysdeath crept through the window, long shadows before her, naught but darkness ahead. Wordless, near soundless, Reyne walked to Dior's side and, with a sigh, enfolded her in her arms.

"'I'm sorry.'

"The sob torn from Dior's throat came from her belly. She *quaked* with grief, so hard and so long I thought she might never stop. The Princess held tight, tears spilling down her cheeks. She said nothing, for what words could comfort a daughter who'd just lost the only father she'd known? Some loss is too bitter to swallow, Historian. They say time heals all wounds, but in that, as in all things, they lied. Truth is, some hurts run so deep they can never be mended. Truth is, grim Father Time does not give. He only takes.

"'He…'

"Dior gasped, sobbing so hard she could barely speak.

"'Oh, G-God, Reyne he…'

"'I know,' she whispered. 'I know, love.'

"'I can't b-believe it.' She shook her head, buried her face in the Princess's hair. 'What am I going to d-do? What am I going to do without him?'

"'Hold on. Hold on to me.'

"Dior sobbed again, clutching Reyne and struggling just to breathe. They wept together, those girls, holding each other in a sea grown so cold and dark it swallowed the very horizon. But Reyne whispered in that dark, a tiny flame yet burning.

"'I'm here, Dior.'

"Dior sniffed thick, swallowing. And drawing back to look into her Princess's eyes, she lunged for Reyne's mouth. The kiss was desperate, aching, and for a moment, Reyne returned it, filled with that same hopeless, heedless longing. But soon she broke away, shaking her head, kissing the tears from the Grail's eyes and cheeks but not her lips.

"'We can't, Dior. We *can't.*'

"'Oh, God…'

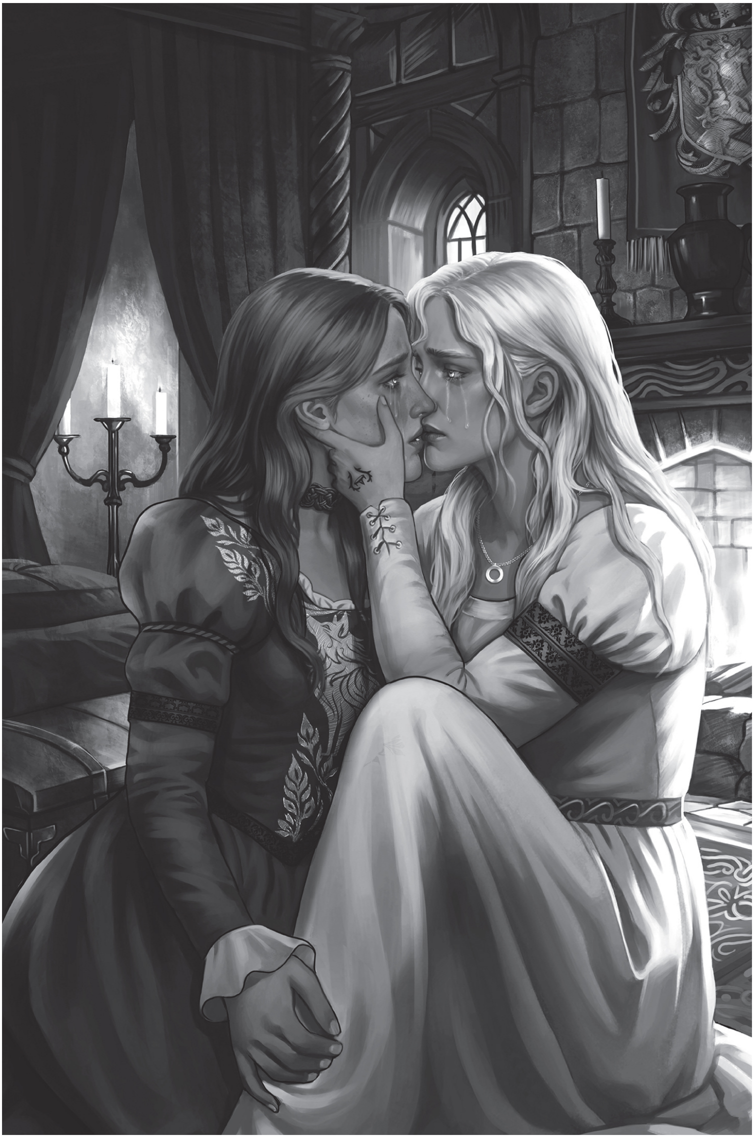
"'I'm sorry.'

"'I know. I…' Dior hung her head, eyes squeezed shut. 'I understand.'

"'No. You don't. If you did, you'd not have named me a coward, Dior. Nor a liar.'

"'I'm s-sorry.' Dior met Reyne's eyes then. 'I shouldn't have said that.'

"'Damn right you shouldn't have.'



“The Princess smoothed a pale lock of hair from the Grail’s lips, sighing.

“‘I’d have come to you in time, love. I’d have been yours in all the ways you wanted, no matter what the Testaments say. There’s no sin in the way you made me feel. The way you *make* me feel. Even now, the way you look at me, I … I want us. I want *you.* I would that we could be together, in every way we choose. But even if we’re sisters and that can never be, know that I love you, Dior Lachance. Until world’s end and dawn dies.’

“Dior hung her head, brow pressed to Reyne’s. Shadows spilled across the floor from the burning hearth, and it seemed a great chasm had opened under her feet. Darkness swelled beneath her, so cold and complete none could have blamed her if she'd fallen then.

"'I don't know what to do.'

"'You have to hold on, Dior. Just hold on.'

"'F-for *what*?'

"'For the moment things get brighter. For tomorrow.'

"'But there's no such thing,' she whispered. 'By the time it arrives, it's today. Tomorrow's a dream. A promise that breaks itself every night.' Dior pawed her eyes and sighed. 'Tomorrow never comes, Reyne.'

"'But that's the beauty of it.' The Princess cupped Dior's cheek and smiled. 'It breaks every night, but each sunrise makes itself anew. And in that promise lies possibility *nobody* can foresee. Each new day can bring a miracle, Dior. Every dawn leaves yesterday behind. Tomorrow might be a dream, but it's one worth fighting for. So is love. And so is this world.'

"Dior hung her head and whispered.

"'You should go.'

"'I want to stay with you. I want to *be* with you.'

"The Grail simply shook her head.

"'I should get ready. I've a fitting in a half hour. For my wedding dress.'

"Their eyes met then. Emerald and sapphire and ice blue, shining with tears.

"'I'll be aright.'

"'Dior…'

"'I'll be aright, Reyne.'

"Pale behind her freckles, uncertain behind her nod, Princess á Maergenn loosed her grip. We could sense the anguish in her mind, the unfilled longing in her limbs. She didn't *want* to let go. Not now. Not ever. Though they'd quarreled, Reyne's loyalty was unshaken, and though they might be kin, her love was undimmed. The *want* in her, the desire to throw all caution to the winds and simply *be* with this girl left the Princess shaking. Aching.

"But Dior had already stepped away.

"'I wish…'

"Reyne shook her head, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"'I wish it didn't have to be this way.'

"'Wish in one hand, Princess. Shit in the other.' Dior sniffed. 'See which fills up first.'

"Reyne pawed at her eyes and padded toward the door. But reaching the threshold, she turned back toward Dior, her whisper cracking at the edges.

"'I love you.'

"'I know.'

"'I'm sorry.'

"'… I know.'

“The Princess hung her head. Closed the door behind her.

“And Dior was alone.”

X

A HANDFUL OF WORDS

“*HE IS COMING.*

“Such was the rumor. Such was the fear. Such was the whisper in every commonroom, every hearth, every bordello and bar and boudoir in Augustin. It held the city in cold claws, gripped its soldiers with quiet dread and citizens with rising terror; a shadow fallen upon the Heart of Elidaen no pyre nor prayer could banish.

“*The Forever King is coming back.*

“Weeks had passed since Phoebe’s return. Wintersdeep had arrived in full, and with it came Elidaen’s season of storms. Every year since daysdeath’s fall they’d seemed to worsen, and that year, they raged with a fury no historian could recall. The capital was lashed with constant tempests, snows falling so fierce what little daylight we had seemed choked to constant night. Rumor had begun in earnest the week before; that with these furies to cover him, the Forever King must surely be on his way, marching with deathless feet toward the empire’s doom. The generals of the Golden Host had eyes abroad of course; brave men and women ranging across the frozen northern reaches, looking for signs of the legion’s coming. But no word, warning or otherwise, had reached the capital in days. And in that dreadful silence, the city’s commanders found confirmation.

“Voss was murdering their scouts.

“Augustin was utterly blind.

“He *was* coming.

"But not all news in those nights was dark. After Joaquin spoke of the Black Lion's betrayal to the Prince, the knowledge that few could now be trusted to protect the Grail had been brought home. Philippe took greatest pains to ensure the safety of his bride-to-be, giving over a small legion of troops to the command of her Unbound. And more, Mother Maryn and I were finally allowed to leave our chambers. We were always accompanied by Inquisitorial troops, of course. They were led by that hulking slice of beef, Moulin, and the trust between us was paper-thin. But still, we oversaw Dior's protection, erecting a wall of steel between her and any who might do her harm. The wedding was set for weeksend, the coronation at Maidsfeast looming closer each dawn, and Maryn was taking no risks in ensuring Dior's well-being.

"More troops had arrived from the southern provinces, and though we'd still miss my brother's numbers, the force mustered to the capital's defense was impressive. The finest were the last to muster, but also most welcome—a legion of crack bowmen and three *thousand* cavaliers from the château at Daggercoast."

Celene shook her head.

"I am told in years before daysdeath, horses were so common that a farmer might afford one to plow his fields. But in the years after the sun failed, large livestock were simply too costly to keep. Horses feared me now, but I had always been fascinated with them, and watching those cavaliers parade through the streets of Rive Cœur, I found myself smiling in soft wonder. I had never seen so many beautiful beasts in my life."

"We had three," Jean-François murmured. "On the farm. Bella, Soot, and…"

The historian frowned, staring into the dark as he realized …

"God, I can't remember the third one."

"You were a peasant boy, Marquis?"

Jean-François looked across the river, eyes narrowed. The Last Liathe was watching him, expressionless, cold as the stone she sat upon.

"A farmer's son, oui. We lived near San Maximille. Centuries ago now, it seems."

"Your Empress found you there?"

"Hardly," Jean-François scoffed. "My lady finds as little joy in the rustic charms of the provinces as I did, Mlle Castia. No, I ran away to Augustin to seek my fortune. Apprenticed with an artiste of some repute. Rented a squalid little loft in Rive Nord with a handful of other starving dreamers. Painted portraits and fucked the occasional fatcat to make the rent." He smiled softly. "My dark mother was one of my subjects."

"Does it sadden you, to know that loft is gone now? Those dreamers all dead?"

Jean-François's smile faded.

"The wolf frets not for the ills of the worm."

"But does he fret for himself? All he lost? As the dreamer, so dies the dream?"

The historian arched one brow, lips pursed.

And taking his hint, Celene spoke on.

"Duke Maarten de La Fontaine, le Chevalier des Faucons, was capitaine of the cavaliers—a Sword of the Realm, knighted by Emperor Alexandre, who had been godfather to all three of his children. Maarten was a broad-chested bear of a man, with a booming voice and a black beard big enough to lose a herd of sheep inside. His coming was heralded with jubilance, and such was his confidence in the capital's defenses, the Duke had brought his wife and daughters to attend the royal nuptials.

"The night before the wedding ceremony, with all the palace abuzz, the de La Fontaines were welcomed with a royal banquet. Maarten and his wife Yvaine sat at the table of honor, the Duke offering toasts to the groom and his bride-to-be. Dior and Philippe spoke softly during the meal, and the Grail kept any longing stares toward her Princess to a minimum. Talk was first of war, but soon turned to the ceremony amorrow, and though at first she'd resisted as best she could, it seemed even the Empress and her supporters were given over to the idea of the Grail's union to the Prince now. It is a strange thing, Historian, but very little in this world brings out the bluejays of joy like a wedding, particularly a royal one, and we ourselves were caught up in the idea of it.

"The wedding, and the salvation it would bring.

"Yet it was well after the plates had been cleared that the most important conversation of the eve took place.

"It happened in a small sitting room, in the heart of the vast guest wing.

"Two women and a handful of words.

"In light of Gabriel's betrayal, Dior had deemed it safest that she abide on holy ground before her nuptials. Her chambers had been relocated from Château Impérial to the rectory of Cathédrale de Lumière—a lavish estate at the church's eastern flank colloquially known as the *Pontifex's Palace,* where the Grail now slept and ate. We could not watch her on sanctified earth of course, contenting ourselves to patrol the square outside from dusk until dawn. But in the interest of keeping vigil over those she cared for, we'd hidden our mote with Reyne that night. And so it was we'd been there to witness it.

"The beginning of the end of everything.

"'Dearest sister,' Reyne sighed.

"'My dove, it's so good to see you,' Yvaine breathed.

"The pair embraced, emotions kept in check at the feast finally unveiled in private. Duchess Yvaine de La Fontaine was not much akin to her youngest sister in appearance—fairer of face and smaller of frame, though the pair shared their mother's flame-red hair. Yvaine's locks were styled in the height of courtly fashion, and while a careful observer might see traces of Ossian heritage in her freckles and sharp green eyes, Yvaine's accent was near vanished; long years in the east having eroded most traces of the west.

"'I'm sorry we didn't have a chance to speak before the feast,' she said. 'It's been absolute bedlam since we arrived. *And* before, truth told. Maarten insisted on bringing the girls for the sake of morale, and you know what a handful they can be.'

"'It's aright,' Reyne smiled. 'We're speaking now.'

"'I'm so glad you're here, love. When I heard about Mama and Una and Cait…' Yvaine closed her eyes, squeezing her sister tighter. 'God, I feared the worst for you too. I should *never* have let you journey back to Maergenn.'

"'It's not like you could've stopped me.'

"Yvaine chuckled at that, despite the tears.

"'Well, that's a fact. You're as stubborn as Mama is.'

"A sigh.

"'Was.'

"The pair broke apart reluctantly, sat on a couch beside each other. The Duchess fetched a kerchief from her bodice, dabbing her lashes carefully so as not to smear the kohl. It was strange to think of this pair as siblings in truth—the gulf in their ages was almost wide enough for Yvaine to be Reyne's mother, and Reyne had grown up in Elidaen under Yvaine's wing, more ward than sister. But they were united in grief at least; sorrow entwined with the smoke in the fireplace and the song of thunder overhead.

"'I'm sorry, Yvaine,' Reyne said. 'I tried. When the Blackheart struck, I *tried* to—'

"'Hush now,' Yvaine replied, mopping Reyne's cheeks. 'Know no shame, sweet sister. Maergenn's fall is not your fault.'

"'You spent a fortune having me trained by the Chante-Lames. Least I could've done is died in defense of our homeland. But I made no difference at all.'

"'You cut that rot *right* out. I'm certain you fought like a—'

"'Mother put me in the mushroom silos, Yvaine.' Reyne shook her head, lips pinched pale. 'I waited thirteen years to return to Ossway. Trained every day 'til my hands bled in the hopes the great Niamh Nineswords might notice me when I got home. And when the Dyvok threatened to annihilate our people, everything we were, *everything* she'd fought to build … she set me in defense of the bloody foodstores.'

"Yvaine hung her head. 'We heard only rumor about her death at the Blackheart's hands. Do I … do I want to know the truth?'

"'No.'

"Reyne shook her head, sorrow welling in those faeling eyes.

"'All my life, I fought for her to notice me. And now she never will.'

"'Mother was never the most … maternal of women. But ache not for the love of ghosts, sister. The dead fill no hole but the grave.'

"'Easy for you to say. You were always her favorite.'

"'Oh, oui,' Yvaine scoffed. 'Marrying me to an Elidaeni lord and sending me as far from Ossway as she could, while naming Cait captain of her fleet and Una commander of her legions.' The Duchess smiled sadly. 'Much as I adore them, I was only deemed good for making children. And the alliances that come with them.'

"'She put you as far from danger as she could, Yvaine.'

"The Duchess looked up then, cupping her sister's cheek.

"'And why do think she put you in the foodstores?'

"Reyne paused at that, the thought washing over and through her. And as it sank home, her face crumpled and the tears came anew. The sisters cried together then, the last two daughters of a fallen queen, holding each other in the dark.

"Finally they broke apart, soft and sore with grief. But as she set eyes on her sister again, Reyne lifted a hand to her lips, not quite quick enough to smother her snicker.

"'What?' Yvaine demanded, blowing her nose. 'What's so bloody amusing?'

"Reyne licked her thumb, smudging away the streaks of kohl beneath Yvaine's eyes. 'You look like a badger fell in a bucket of black.'

"'Oh, *sod* off,' Yvaine scoffed, gifting her sister an affectionate thump. 'You're hardly a bloody oil painting yourself. Who's dressing you these days, anyway? I taught you far better than … well, *that.*' The Duchess de La Fontaine eyed Reyne's outfit with distaste; the knee-high boots and light hauberk, settling finally on the collar about her throat. 'And what the bloody hell's this ghastly thing? You've the look of a bad dog in want of a good leash.'

"Reyne caressed the ring of everknots Phoebe had given her.

"'A gift,' she said. 'From a friend of my father.'

"The Duchess blinked sharply, her expression clouded.

"'… What are you talking about?'

"Reyne sighed. 'I know who my father was, Yvaine.'

"The Duchess paled, eyes drifting to the collar again. 'Who told you?'

"'A woman named Phoebe á Dúnnsair. She was at the feast tonight.'

"'The Highlander. What did she say?'

"'That Mother met him on campaign in north Ossway. A duskdancer lord named Connor á Lachlainn. A descendant of Ailidh the Bold. Phoebe told me I'm the daughter of he and Niamh Nineswords both. A Princess of Lowlands and High.'

"Yvaine said nothing, looking instead to the flickering hearth.

"'… Yvaine?'

"'It's late. Long day amorrow. We should speak of this after the wedding.'

"The Duchess tried to rise, but the Princess seized her hand. 'Yvaine?'

"The Duchess tried to draw away. 'We should abed—'

"'Sister.'

"That word stilled the Duchess, turning now to look at Reyne as she rose to her feet. Her lip trembled, and though she tried, Yvaine couldn't hold her younger sister's gaze.

"'I'm … I'm sorry, Reyne.'

"'Sister … what aren't you telling me?'

"The Duchess shook her head, jaw clenched as Reyne squeezed her hands.

"'Yvaine, *please*.'

"'Your father…'

"The Duchess chewed her lip, finally finding her sister's eyes.

"'Reyne, your father was Ryan á Sadhbh.'

"'*Laerd* Ryan á Sadhbh?'

"'He was Mother's aide-de-camp during the Highland War.' Yvaine winced, voice gone soft. 'Aide-de-camp and more, I suppose.'

"'But … he was married.'

"'To Colleen á Sadhbh,' Yvaine nodded. 'Laerd Lady of *Clan* á Sadhbh. And next to Mother, the richest and most powerful woman in Ossway. Four years they'd fought each other, before the Maergenn pax. And the knowledge that Colleen's husband seeded a daughter in the Nineswords' belly would have spelled an *end* to that bloody peace.'

"'But … my eyes. Phoebe told me that Connor…'

"Yvaine looked at her sister with unmasked pity.

"'Laerd Ryan's grandmother had the same. Old *Witcheyes Sadhbh,* they used to call her, much to Laerd Ryan's displeasure. And the older you grew, the more you resembled him. That's why Mama sent you to Elidaen to live with me, love. So none would mark you as Ryan's when you grew up.'

"'But…'

"Reyne touched the collar at her neck, struck near dumb now.

"'I…'

"'I'm *sorry,* sister,' Yvaine sighed, kissing Reyne's hands. 'Mother told me the truth when she asked me to take you in. I *wanted* to tell you before, but she made me swear on her life to say not a word. I don't suppose that matters anymore.'

"Reyne was yet speechless, pale and befuddled, swaying on her feet as if she might fall. A kaleidoscope of thoughts filled her, and brushing gentle upon their surface, we could taste every one. Disappointment, to learn she was not some promised princess destined to unite her homeland. Suspicion, wondering if Phoebe á Dúnnsair had deceived her or simply been mistaken. But beneath and between and beyond the turmoil and confusion and heartbreak, a moment of realization; joyful, crystalline, so sharp and bright it cut through all other notions and left them in ribbons upon the floor.

"'We're not sisters…' she whispered.

"'Oh, love, *no,*' Yvaine moaned, pressing Reyne's knuckles to her lips once more. 'I'm sorry, I'm *sorry,* I know it was wrong. But Mother made me swear —'

"'No, I don't mean…'

"Reyne blinked, a smile of purest joy curling her lips.

"'Oh, God, Yvaine, I *love* you.' Reyne seized her sister, clutching her so tight the Duchess gasped. 'I love you, *I love you,* I *LOVE* YOU!'

"Yvaine laughed, confused, blinking, returning her sister's embrace.

"'I … love you too?'

"'I have to tell her,' Reyne declared, overjoyed, cupping her sister's face and showering her with kisses. 'I'm sorry, I have to go! We'll speak amorrow!'

"Reyne ran, leaving a bewildered Yvaine in her wake. We could feel the storm of joy and sadness, elation and confusion, all roiling within Reyne's mind as she pounded down the corridors of Château Impérial. Servants stumbled out of her way, gens d'armes called after her as she dashed past, asking if all was well, and the cry of 'All is *perfect,* monsieur!' echoed in her wake. We could feel it in her, warm as fire on a wintersdeep night. The thought that no matter whatever else might come, whatever trials lay in store …

"'We can be together.'

"The whisper curled her lips, laughter following, heart pounding in her chest as the Princess ran through the Golden Halls toward her love.

"'Dior and I can be together *forever.*'

"It was but a flash. A shadow at the corner of her eye, slipping into a deeper darkness as she dashed through a crossroad of corridors. But it was odd enough to catch her, slow her, hold her still now. We'd seen it also, from our perch at the edge of her curls, swift as a hummingbird's wings and gone quick as dayflies. But we'd *seen* it.

"A man with a sword.

"A man all in black."

XI

THE STONE-COLD EDGE OF THE KNIFE

“REYNE STOLE BACK to the corridor crossroads, cheek pressed to the wall, peering down the hallway where she’d caught her glimpse. Château Impérial’s guest wing was grander than most palaces in the realm, and though well lit, the halls were too vast to be free of shadows, too numerous for gens d’armes to be posted at every doorway. The corridors were quiet, the heavy footfalls of a distant patrol and Reyne’s thumping heart the only sound. The Princess was still as a statue, squinting, sweat in her eyes. We could feel her doubt now, wondering if that figure were some fancy of her overwrought mind.

“*We saw it, also.*

“Reyne flinched as the thought rang in her head, pulse pounding as she whispered.

“‘Celene? Is that … you?’

“*We are with you, Princess á Maergenn.*

“She felt our wings flutter on her neck, reaching up to swat us. But we perched instead upon her fingers, little wings buzzing as she lifted us up before bewildered eyes.

“‘Have … have you been *spying* on me?’

“*We have been watching your back,* our thoughts told her. *There are none so dear to us as Dior, and none so dear to her as* you. *If you wish to take umbrage at our impoliteness, so be it. But we beg you, take it later.*

“Reyne set her eyes back on the corridor. ‘You saw him? That man?’

“*We did.*

“‘I don’t know if it was a trick of the light, but his hands, I *swear…’*

“*Silver.*

“She swallowed, dragging one curl from a sweat-stained brow.

“‘Gabriel de León is here.’

“*Or one of his lackeys. Come to seek the Grail.*

“‘… You think he means her ill?’

“*He serves Fabién Voss, Princess. We do not think he means her well.*

“Reyne licked her lips, glancing around. ‘I should call the gens d’armes.’

“*NO.*

“Reyne flinched, and we softened our thoughts lest we frighten her more.

“*My brother is the most cunning of foxes, Princess. Should he hear hounds on his trail, he will go to ground, and we may not catch his scent again. I have already fetched Mother Maryn, we are on our way. Stay where you are, out of harm’s way. We will sniff this serpent swiftly out, and deal with him all the swifter.*

“Reyne nodded, fingertips brushing her collar. ‘Come quick.’

“We were already doing just that; a storm of tiny wings battling the wintersdeep gales sweeping Place San Maximille. As soon as we’d caught a whiff of our dear brother, we’d sought Maryn, thoughts touching hers across the plaza. And with hissed warning to the inquisitors beside us, we’d burst into a storm of red, speeding toward the château. That Gabriel had no clue where Dior now abided was some comfort, but the fact he’d penetrated the battlements and patrols and made it all the way to the château’s guest wing had us *marveling.* He must’ve been driven by a need that burned bright as hellfire, risking his life at the beck of his dark master for a chance to steal Dior right from under our noses.

“But not if we could help it.

“We flew on, all thought bent upon stopping him. We’d grown up together, loved each other, the last two of our famille alive. But if I was honest, we’d been on course to collision since he’d carved his skin silver and I’d fallen into darkness. Two stars, locked in each other’s pull, spiraling ever closer toward the other’s destruction. And this was it. The blood at the bottom of our barrel. The stone-cold edge of the knife.

“But Reyne …

“Reyne wasn’t listening.

“*Princess, what are you doing?*

“Moving she was. Out from her hide and down the corridor ahead. She’d been content to wait, pressed against the wall with heart in throat and hands in fists. But then she’d seen it again, seen *him,* quick but unmistakable. The tantalizing glimpse of a man with long black hair and silver on his knuckles, slipping through swiftly closed double doors.

“And like a damned fool, she’d followed.

"*Reyne, stay where you ARE.*

"The Princess ignored us, stealing instead toward the doors he'd slipped through. There was defiance in her; a daughter of the Nineswords, rankling at being ordered about like some common serf. There was fury; that this man would steal so brazenly into the heart of imperial power to strike the girl she loved. But most, there was *curiosity* now. *Doubt.* The tale of Gabriel de León's betrayal had come from the lips of Phoebe á Dúnnsair, remember. The same woman who'd been so terribly wrong about the identity of Reyne's father. And while the Princess didn't believe Phoebe had lied so much as guessed wrongly, what else might the Highlander have been mistaken about?

"*Reyne, wait for us!*

"But she didn't listen.

"Instead, that fool girl crept forward, quick as cats and soft as mice, through those doors. She crouched low, faeling eyes searching the dark as we implored her get out, *no GET OUT*. The room was a sumptuous dining hall, lit by dim chymical globes and the pulse of lighting spilling through tall windows. A table of gold-etched mahogany stretched the room's length, set with rows of plush, high-backed chairs. The hearth was empty, the shadows long, another set of doors across the room. Reyne was creeping toward them when a hand snaked from the dark, smothering her cry.

"'Peace, Prin—'

"Reyne lashed out with all the grace of a student of the Chante-Lames, stomping her assailant's foot and driving an elbow at his ribs. And had he been a mere man, the sound of crunching toes might have been swift followed by the hymn of cracking ribs. But for all his faults, her assailant was no man; side-stepping Reyne's foot neatly and blocking her elbow, neater still. Quicker than cats, nothing close to soft as mice, the Princess was swept off her feet, one hand over her mouth, another pushing a blade up under her chin.

"'Will you calm your fucking tits, girl, I *let* you see me!'

"Gabriel sat astride Reyne, pinning her arms with his thighs. The Princess struggled briefly, but one glance at his blood-red eyes told Reyne the Black Lion was dosed to the gills on sanctus, his strength far beyond matching. My brother leaned close, red gaze fixed on hers, his voice an iron-hard whisper.

"'I'm going to take my hand away. And *you're* not going to scream.'

"Reyne snarled, eyes narrowed to knifecuts. Gabriel sighed.

"'I met you in Dún Maergenn when you were a little girl. You and your sisters. Your mama knighted me after we liberated Triúrbaile. You'd likely not remember.'

"Gabriel smiled then, eyes gone dim and distant.

"'Sweet Ais' was the quiet one. Una the fierce one. But even back then, Princess, you struck me as the *clever* one. Ask yourself why I let you see me. Ask why you're not dead.' He let those thoughts sink in, Reyne ceasing her struggles. ‘Now, I’m going to take my hand away. And *you’re* not going to scream. Are you?’

“The Princess breathed deep.

“Slowly shook her head.

“Silver glinting on his knuckles, Gabriel lifted his hand from her mouth.

“‘Where’s Dior?’

“‘Where you’ll never find her, dog.’

“‘I’m not playing games, Princess. There’s more on the scales here than you can *possibly* fucking imagine. Tell me where she is before—’

“‘Before what? You cut my throat? Do it and be done, you faithless coward. Prove yourself the traitor we already know you to be.’

“‘You cack-witted fool, I’m no fucking traitor.’

“‘You serve the Forever King! And unlike you, I’ll not betray the girl I love at the beck of the monster who wants to enslave her—’

“‘I don’t serve Voss, he killed my wife!’

“‘The blood makes slaves of the hardest heart.’

“‘He can’t slave me either, I drank Dior’s blood!’ Gabriel’s lips were flecked with spit, fist bunched at her collar, white-knuckled and trembling. ‘There’s none under heaven who know better than me what a monster is Fabién Voss, girl. But he is nothing—*nothing*—compared to the monster we woke beneath Dún Maergenn.’

“‘What are you *talking* about?’

“‘*Maryn*. The Esani don’t want to end daysdeath, girl. They want to—’

“The windows blew inward; savage, shattering, the air filled with the howl of wintersdeep winds and the scent of ancien blood. Gabriel snaked from atop Reyne with a black curse, reaching into his bandolier. A storm was come upon my brother now; a storm of red wings and ancient rage, whirling in the heart of the room like fury made flesh. Gabriel’s arm swung wide, a fistful of silverbombs hurled into that tempest, exploding bright as the long-lost sun. Blood turned to char, wings to ash, a vast swathe of moths immolated in the blinking of an eye. But enough remained to unite, coalescing into a tiny form, scorched skin and midnight gaze and golden curls.

“*‘The Black Lion of Lorson,’* Maryn said.

“Gabriel said nothing, already flying across the room, silversteel blade clutched in one fist. Maryn only smiled.

“*‘Ye should have stayed buried, boy.’*

“We were yet speeding across the plaza, Maryn’s wings far swifter than our own. But we could see through our mote as the Mother raised her hand. Dread and sorrow raged within us, for a part of me loved Gabriel still. And as Maryn’s sanguimancy was unleashed, we expected to see him erupt like those sailors aboard *Shadowchild*; blood flung from every orifice and into the chill-white air. But as our Priori curled her little fingers into a fist …

"Nothing happened.

"Nothing happened at *all.*

"Gabriel's blade scythed through the air, silver and steel entwined by the forgemasters of San Michon. As it met Maryn's flesh, it cut true; a hot blade to fresh snow. Maryn shrieked as her hand left her wrist, bursting to ashes. Swift as silver my brother followed through, blade slicing her throat deep enough to scrape bone. Maryn gasped, black eyes wide, red tongue lolling as blood sprayed like jewels through the air. And plunging his fingers through the hole he'd just sliced, Gabriel took hold of Maryn's *spine.*

"He smashed her little body into the wall, the blow so violent it shattered the bricks to dust. The Mother of Monsters flailed, gasping, gargling as my brother hissed.

"'You can't hurt me, sanguimancer. Her blood is in my veins.'

"Gabriel squeezed, bones grinding, flesh pulping.

"'But not in *yours,* I wager.'

"The air went brittle, Maryn's eyes bulging, and from the rend he'd sliced in her throat, red smoke began to rise. Gabriel was hurting her, we realized, *truly* hurting her; unleashing the power of Wulfric's blood to boil the Mother dry. She couldn't even scream as her veins began to bubble, reaching for Gabriel's wrist. But dosed near to delirium on sanctus, he proved just as swift, catching her one good hand and pinning it to the wall. The blood of the Mother of Monsters began to burn, sheer terror in those bottomless eyes; a being of eight centuries now tottering on the very edge of the abyss.

"But she stood not alone.

"The storm of us arrived, hundreds of pieces roiling through the broken window, many become one. Fingernails slicing our palm, we lunged at Gabriel, and in that moment, Maryn's body splashed to the floor; that trick of the eye, that spell of the blood. Re-forming beside a gobsmacked Princess Reyne, the Mother collapsed, skin charred and veins choked with ashes. But Gabriel had no time to finish his bloody work, turning now to us.

"'Sister.'

"*'Brother.'*

"We met like flame and powder, immolating all around us. Furniture shattering, boots crunching broken glass, chaos full unleashed. No words were spoke at first; no witty back-and-forth like duelists in some children's tale, trading quips with their blows. No, our hate and rage ran far too deep for that. There were only snarls of fury and hissed curses and the whisper of our blades cutting the air. And silent as ghosts, bitter as the poison between us, my brother and I set about trying to murder each other.

"Gabriel fought not with Ashdrinker as in nights past, but common silversteel. He could not parry our strikes, nor turn our blows aside; our bloodblade would simply flow around his and continue unchecked. We near took his head off with our first strike, almost gutted him with our second, sending him skidding back across the room. But he learned after that, not parrying, but dodging with that sinuous speed for which he was famed, defeating our blows by striking before we could take them. The choir of voices were shrieking now in my head, none so loud as Wulfric—to be clashing against the son he never knew, never loved, all of us off-balance and reeling. But we ignored them all.

"'Did you know?' Gabriel hissed at last.

"We made no reply, striking nethers, throat, chest. But for all the lies told about my brother, he *was* among the greatest swordsmen to ever heft a blade. I'd given years to the study of swordcraft in San Yves, but Gabriel had given his life to it. And though Wulfric guided my hand, my skill was a shadow of his own. When you give yourself to a thing, you *become* the thing. Reshaping your place in the world and its place for you.

"And my brother had given his life to the murder of monsters.

"We unleashed our flail of blood in our other fist, hoping to set him on the backfoot. But Gabriel fought like a man possessed, and in truth, perhaps he was; slicing our arm so deep he near took it off, sending us crashing into the wall with a kick to our chest.

"'Did you know?' he spat.

"He glowered across the broken furniture and glittering snow, borne through the shattered window by freezing winds. The storm of souls inside my skull was as loud as the storm without now, his own thoughts a tempest of hurt and rage and sorrow.

"'Did you know what the Esani were? What they *wanted*?'

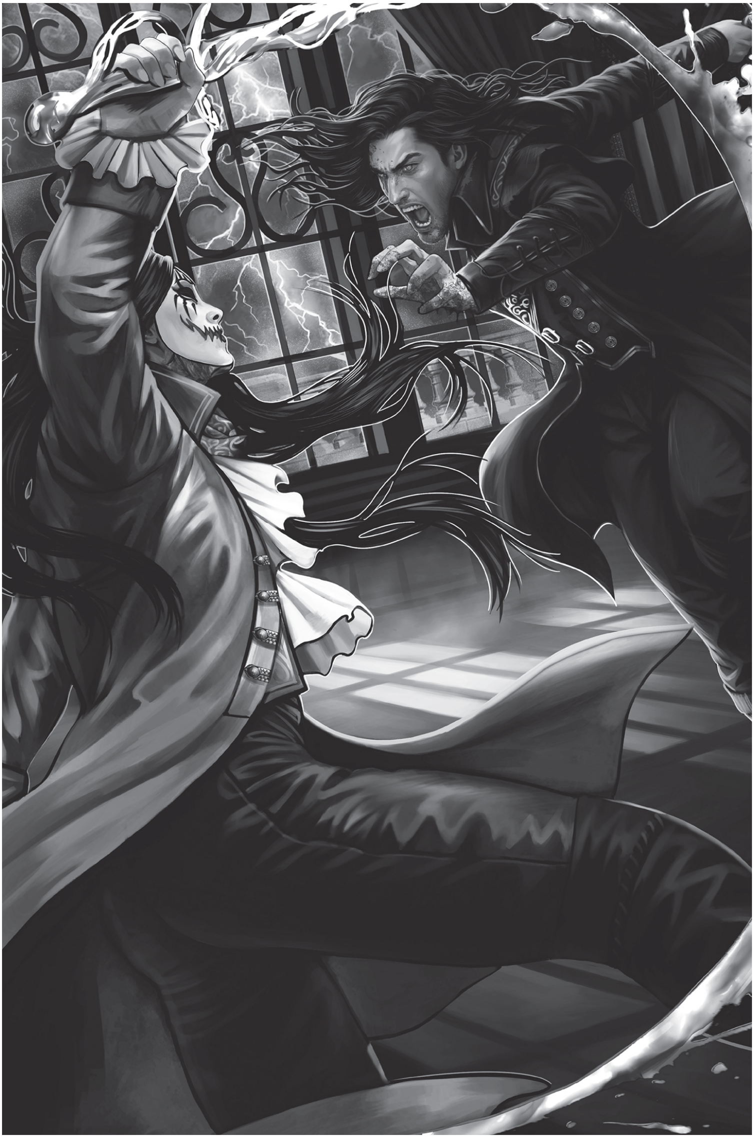
"'The salvation of this world?'

"'Celene—'

"'Waste not your breath, brother. You serve a bootlicker of hell's grim tyrant. And *I* serve heaven's eternal king.'

"Maryn was yet on her knees, retching burned blood. Reyne had bolted into the hallway, shouting for the guard. Gabriel was torn now, his gambit all undone. But we gave him no chance to tuck tail and run. When we were children, we'd fought back-to-back against make-believe foes around my papa's forge. *Ever outnumbered,* we'd tell each other. *Never outmatched. Always, lions.* But there were no legions now. Only we two.

"And we were children no longer.



“We flew at him, blade raised, flail slicing the air as it sped toward his throat. He danced backward across the shattered table, broken glass, serpentine swift. We could hear Reyne shouting, the approach of heavy boots; inquisitors and gens d’armes roused by her call. They were legion, we could tell, too many for my brother to best. But he stood his ground, meeting my charge, unwilling to turn his back now.

“He struck a terrifying blow at my heart. But in a blinking I was gone; my own spell of the eye, my own trick of the blood. As the shell I’d worn splashed to the floor, the rest of me re-formed behind him, just as we'd done that day we'd fought in the shadow of San Michon. But it's a careless man who's bit by the same snake twice, and Gabriel was ready, crouching low and spinning about, bringing his blade up with a roar. He cleaved our belly wide, our arm at the elbow, blood spraying across falling snow. With a cry we collapsed, crunching to the boards, our brother now stood over us with his boot on our chest.

"He looked down at us, eyes as cold as the steel in his hand.

"Hunter to monster.

"Brother to sister.

"But his blow didn't fall.

"'I don't believe it,' he whispered. 'I *won't.* Call me a fool, but even after all you've done, I'll not believe you could've known. Not my baby sister. Not my Hellio—'

"Swift needles sliced the air, muddied crimson, whispering as they came. With a gasp, Gabriel turned aside, lashing out with his sword. And though my brother was dosed on his sacrament, weaving through that hail of red, some still proved the swifter. He was pierced, sliced, split wide as three blades erupted from his back. His sword slipped from his fingers, a bloody curse bubbling on his lips as he fell to his knees on broken glass.

"Maryn was back on her feet, a bloody stump where her right hand should've been, the gaping hole in her throat still seeping smoke. The blood she wielded was burned near to black, drawn from her own ash-choked veins. Yet still she drew herself up, a halo of bloody blades now circling about her body. And raising her hand, she pointed toward my brother, thoughts ringing in the cathedral of our mind.

"*Judgment Comes.*

"'HOLD!'

"The cry was accompanied by the song of drawn blades, two dozen men in Inquisitor red now bursting into the room. At their fore strode Capitaine Moulin, and at their back came Princess á Maergenn. The soldiers fanned out, swords drawn, pistols aimed at my brother, still bleeding and wheezing on his knees.

"'Hold!' Moulin cried again. 'In the name of God and Empress Isabella!'

"*Kill him.*

"It was Maryn speaking, eyes narrowed, golden curls drenched in blood. Her throat was a smoking ruin, but her thoughts sang in the heads of all in the room.

"*Kill him, Capitaine.*

"'Nobody is killing *anybody*!' Reyne marched into the room, putting herself between Gabriel and our Priori. 'Everyone just take a bloody breath! Gabriel de León is under arrest!'

"'Oui,' Moulin growled. 'He will be taken to the Tower of Tears, and questioned by High Inquisitrix Maya and her Maidens of Bliss.’

“Maryn shook her head then, glowering at my brother.

“*Nothing he says can be trusted. He is* slave *to Fabién Voss*.

“‘If that’s the case, Dior can break the bond of blood between them, and we can learn the truth.’ Reyne stood tall as she stared Maryn down, a daughter of the Nineswords unveiled. ‘He risked his life to break in here. He could’ve killed me, yet stayed his hand. I for one would like to hear what this man has to say.’

“The Princess glanced at my brother; silvered hands pressed to the sucking wounds in his chest. He was drenched in blood, gasping, but he managed to nod as she spoke.

“‘I’m sure Dior will too.’

“*How much stock think ye the Grail shall place in the testimony of a traitor?*

“Reyne turned on the Mother then. ‘Gabriel de León vowed to protect Dior from the legions of the abyss themselves. He’s already risked his life for hers a dozen times over. I think he’s earned trust enough for Dior to hear him speak. For her to *listen*.’

“Maryn nodded, slow and sad.

“*Then we should dissuade of her that trust, Princess*.

“‘Wha—’

“The blood sang as it came; razor-sharp, charred dark, wielded by a flick of the Mother’s fingers. It struck Reyne in the chest, hard and fierce enough to sunder her hauberk, steel mail shredded like paper. Its point sheared through her ribs, plunged out through her back, splitting the Princess’s heart in two. Her faeling eyes were fixed on my brother, lips parted as if she wished to say something.

“Say anything.

“But with a soft gurgle, Reyne á Maergenn toppled lifeless to the floor.

“Capitaine Moulin cried out, inquisitors turning now on the Mother. But those gleaming blades of muddy crimson circling her body streaked out, piercing every soldier in the room. Blood sprayed, men gasped, crumpling to the floor in ruins. We were speechless, our brother beside us, both staring at Reyne’s corpse upon the broken glass. And lifting Gabriel’s sword from the floor, Maryn plunged it into the Princess’s sundered breast.

“She tilted her head then, surrounded by corpses, eyes on Gabriel.

“*Think ye the Grail shall listen to thee now?*

“More men were coming, more soldiers bursting through both doors and roaring for all to stand down in the Empress’s name. Gabriel tore his eyes from Reyne’s body, fangs bared in a snarl. And with one desperate glance toward me, he flung himself through the broken window, down to the snow-clad cobbles two floors below.

“The gens d’armes ran to the balcony after him, roaring at soldiers in the plaza. We made to follow, but Maryn took our arm, cutting off our protest with a stare as empty and cold as the heavens.

"*T'would be prudent to let the soldiery bring him down, Liathe. T'would be best if thee and I were as distant from this … tragedy … as we can be.*

"Our eyes turned again to poor Reyne, dead in a widening pool of gore. Fate had not been kind enough to have the Princess fall facedown, and those faeling eyes seemed fixed on us. Wide and accusing. We glanced to the window, the snow-filled plaza beyond. Gabriel was surrounded now, fighting tooth and nail, cutting great swathes with bloody fists. But a thousand ants can slay the fiercest lion, and a lucky shot from a wheellock soon pierced my brother's shoulder. They fell on him from all sides then, blood spattering on snow-clad flagstones. An officer roared '*Take him alive! He knows the mind of the Forever King!* ' and stabbing became beating, breaking; shields and pommels and boots.

"Our dead heart was in our throat to watch him fall, the voices in our head all raging save for one—the father who'd never wanted him. Wulfric was silent as Gabriel collapsed, borne down by dozens, thrashed to bloody pulp. And in the gulf where my master's voice might've been, instead I heard my brother's.

"*There's none under heaven who know better than me what a monster is Fabién Voss, girl. But he is nothing—*nothing*—compared to the monster we woke beneath Dún Maergenn.*

"We turned to the Mother, standing amid those corpses. More soldiers were pouring into the room now, aghast at the massacre, the blood on the walls.

"*Hear me now, child,* Maryn's thoughts whispered. *Gabriel de León entered the Golden Halls at the command of his dark master, intent to steal the Holy Grail. He was confronted by brave soldiers of the Imperium and noble Princess á Maergenn, set to defend Dior from treachery. And like a cornered dog, thy brother bit until he was put down.*

"We gazed down at our hands, dripping blood onto shattered glass.

"*Liathe?*

"'… We heard you, Mother.'

"*Dior shall be hard-struck by this tragedy. Phoebe and thee shall give comfort through the wedding amorrow. Hold her steady. The throne is our only concern. Maidsfeast draws close, sweet Celene. All thou hast sacrificed for. All thou hast* suffered. *The kingdom of heaven shall be thy reward eternal, child. This blackened veil* shall *be undone.*

"We looked inside ourselves. The choir of voices, that cathedral of souls, the loudest among them making no sound at all. We glanced to the broken glass at our feet, the silver looking glass above the cold hearth, those reflections he had so often haunted in recent nights. We could not find his face. But still we remembered Wulfric's words from all those years ago—the night we both saved and took his life in San Yves.

“*Thou art* ready*, Celene. For the final mystery of our faith.*

“The final mystery.

“We looked toward our Priori.

“Bowed our head.

“‘Judgment Comes.’”

XII

TARNISHED SILVER

"ALL WAS CHAOS in the hours after Reyne's murder.

"The notion that an enemy of the crown had stolen so far into the palace had Prince Philippe in an uproar, and the entire château was locked down. Maryn and I were marched to our chambers, questioned by a trio of inquisitors from the Tower of Tears. Conscience was a millstone about my neck, but my Priori's stare bored into the back of my skull as I gave testimony of the Black Lion's failed gambit. His attack on the Mother and myself. His butchery of brave imperial troops, and his cold-blooded murder of Princess Reyne—a girl whose only crime was her refusal to betray the whereabouts of the Grail.

"The inquisitors were satisfied after a handful of hours, our chambers locked as they departed. We watched the furor from our windows—soldiers with blazing torches searching the streets, the council buildings, the Golden Halls themselves for more conspirators. We'd no idea what the coming day would bring. But in the small hours before dawn, we were roused from our vigil by pounding at our chamber door.

"Fresh troops were stationed outside—a bevy of toughs in Inquisitor red, hard as coffin nails. These new guards were taking no chances after the murder of Capitaine Moulin and their comrades, and rather than hauberks of mail, they wore suits of halfplate and greathelms now, carried heavy longblades and wheellocks, or axes and tower shields scribed with the flower and flail of Naél. But among all that crimson and steel, we saw the gleam of gold—the scarred face and hunter's eyes of Phoebe á Dúnnsair.

"She was dressed for grief; her three-green clancloth replaced by black linen. One of her slayerbraids had been hacked off in Highland tradition, to be placed upon the Princess á Maergenn's pyre as it was lit. We could tell she'd been weeping. But Phoebe still wore her breastplate of steel, graven with sigils of the Moonsthrone, talons gleaming at every finger's tip. They could slay a kith swift as fire or silver, those claws. We wondered what she might have done with them, had she not been slave to Maryn's blood.

"'Dior requests yer company, bloodwitch.'

"'We serve at the Grail's pleasure, fleshwitch.'

"We turned toward Mother Maryn, now at her chamber door across the foyer. Our Priori was still terribly wounded from Gabriel's attack, her throat scorched, a ragged nub where her hand used to be. Her bloody nun's habit had been replaced by a nightdress of humble sackcloth, her voice a mangled croak.

"*'Celene? '*

"'Dior requests our company, Mother.'

"'Apologies, Mother Maryn.' Phoebe bowed. 'She asked to speak to Celene alone.'

"*'As the Holy Grail commands, so shall we obey. Go with God, faithful daughters. Steer her wise and true.'*

"Maryn's eyes met ours, sharp as knives.

"*'God is watching.'*

"We curtseyed low, departing in the fleshwitch's company, the voices ringing in our head louder than the boots of the soldiers about us. Half the cohort of inquisitors followed, the rest remaining with Maryn as we trod through the château halls. All was abustle, like a beehive overturned, and it seemed preparations for the wedding continued apace despite the evening's tragedy. Majordomos shouted, maids ran hither and thither, serfboys fled the red-faced wrath of quartermasters and cooks. It was hard to tell from here that we stood on the brink of war, that an assassin had struck at the heart of imperial power just hours before. But stepping out into Place San Maximille, that illusion faded.

"Cadres of men in mail, thickets of spears and swords glinting silver, hundreds, *thousands* of soldiers mustered against more treachery. Chevaliers of the realm strode among them—men knighted by the Emperor, tabards embroidered with laurels and the hawks and flowers and chevrons of noble houses. Château Impérial would be the last line of defense if it came to a Voss assault, but even here, barriers were being erected across the streets to narrow them, windows barred. The Dead could move like no mortal soldier; not merely down thoroughfares and alleys, but across rooftops, and each building was being adorned with spiked palisades, like martyrs crowned with thorns. If this were to be the final battle for their empire, House Augustin would make it one to be remembered.

“Yet among these iron spikes and gleaming forests of spears, garlands of paper flowers were being strung, a great red carpet being laid for the wedding procession from Château Impérial to Cathédrale de Lumière. Even in the predawn light, we could see folk assembling at checkpoints to the plaza, carrying paper bouquets and baskets of confetti. Rumor must have been spreading about the Black Lion’s attack—the soldiers about us whispered of nothing else. And still, those folk queued in the freezing cold, eager to find pride of place in the plaza from which to watch the ceremony.”

“Nothing quite like a royal wedding, is there?” Jean-François sighed.

“Nothing at all.”

“It makes sense, I suppose,” the historian mused, sipping from his goblet. “Weddings promise children, and royal children promise peaceful transition of power. Stability of rule. The only kind of permanence mortals can truly know.”

“We think it was simpler than that.”

“The outfits, then?”

Celene scoffed, scraping fingernails along oily stone. Her dark eyes were fixed on that pale moth, once more circling the chymical globe.

“Dior Lachance was lowborn, Marquis. Raised up by God and providence to the highest seat in the land. Folk of the commons saw her as one of their own made good. And if *she* could do it, so might they. She was a faerytale come to life. Happy ever after in flesh.”

“What girl could hope to live up to such expectation?”

“She tried.”

The Last Liathe breathed deep.

“God help her, she tried to the end.

“We crossed a bridge over the plaza canals, steam rising from the surface. The weather was chill enough to make the blood in our veins thicken, but those waters still flowed, heated by the great works at La Rivière de Fer. Black ignis charges were being placed at strategic points, ready to blow the bridges should the battle reach the capital’s heart. This would be the war to end all wars. The throw for all the coin.

“And through it, Dúnnsair and I walked, side by side.

“‘How is Dior?’

“Phoebe glanced at us with eyes narrowed, her recently acquired tail hanging below her skirts and switching side to side. We could feel her contempt, her pure animal rage. The fleshwitch was bound to Maryn, true, but that ensured absolutely *no* affection for us.

“‘How’d ye bloody think?’

“‘Afraid. Vulnerable. We must be cautious here, fleshwitch. We m—’

“‘Dinnae fuckin’ lecture me. I serve my mistress true. But if she’d nae ordered me to leave ye be, I’d have already shoved ye in one o’ these canals, ye traitorous *cunt.*’

“‘God is my judge, fleshwitch. Not you.’

“‘Did ye have aught to do w’that poor girl’s death?’

“We glanced over our shoulders at the cadre of soldiers following. The inquisitors kept a respectful distance, and the clamor and rush of the troops about us was enough to mask our voices from curious ears, but still …

“‘You should not speak of such matters.’

“‘Gabriel de León is *many* things. But a murderer of young girls, he isn’t.’

“‘My brother serves his master. I serve mine. We all do what we must.’

“‘That’s poor solace to the corpses in yer wake.’

“‘Reyne á Maergenn was a faithful daughter of the Almighty. She sits now at his right hand in the kingdom of heaven. Her death is a small price to pay to save so many lives.’

“‘Emperors. Generals. Priests. Ye ever notice how the people who preach loudest about folk dyin’ fer the greater good never do any of the dyin’ themselves?’

“We glanced to the soldiers around us, fresh faced, eyes bright, so young.

“‘It has not escaped our attention.’

“‘This is madness.’

“‘This is belief.’

“‘What’s the difference?’

“I looked at her then, this daughter of Mountains and Moons. She was torn, we could see; sick and pale with grief and guilt, yet bound by bonds of blood. It must have been awful for her, truth told. While I had chosen this, she had been forced into it. And while all this sin *did* ensure a greater good, I could see how pained she was to be a servant of it.

“‘You are an honorable woman, Dúnnsair. I can see why my brother is fond of you.’

“‘Well, you’re a fuckin’ viper, Castia. And I can see why he loathes ye.’

“‘Evil I am, lest evil I be. But when we speak to Dior, hold the line. The Holy Grail must wed her prince this day.’

“The Augustin Halls of Justice were a grand affair, all fluted columns and marble façade, stretching into stormwashed skies. Beautiful statues of Raissa and Eloise flanked the doors, the Angel of Justice armed as ever with his scales of judgment, his sister with her sword and shield of Retribution. Directly behind the halls loomed the spiked silhouette of the Tower of Tears—infamous headquarters of the Holy Inquisition.

“We were marched through grand halls, down wide stairs, into the chill below the building. Outside a set of ironclad doors we found Joaquin and a score of Unbound, the former pacing so fierce, he might have worn a groove in the flagstones.

“‘How is she?’ we asked.

“‘Far from good,’ he replied.

"'Color me all the way surprised,' Phoebe muttered.

"'I don't think she should do this today.' Joaquin cast a worried glance to the doors at their backs. 'I mean … with the wedding in a few hours and all…'

"'We serve at the pleasure o' the Grail, lad.'

"Joaquin turned to us, pale and furious. 'Is it true? The Black Lion slew Princess Reyne with his own blade? He was covered in her blood, they say. *Drenched* with it.'

"'My brother has fallen far, M. Marenn.'

"'The Inquisition have already pressed to have the chevalier taken to the Tower. The death warrant on his head still stands. Dior has held them off for now, but I've no clue what she's liable to do. I've never seen her like this.'

"I looked to Phoebe and nodded.

"'We serve at the pleasure of the Grail.'

"With a sigh, Joaquin glanced to one of the Callums, and the doors were opened wide. Beyond was a morgue—chill and dry, great slabs of stone laid out in neat rows along a cold granite floor. Here, masters of Le Collège des Apothicaires conducted trials on cadavers, attempting to unlock mysteries of the flesh in pursuit of justice. Most murder victims in Augustin were brought here as a matter of course. Wealthy ones, anyway.

"The slabs were many; blood entwined in the air with heartsick weeping. Bodies lay in spattered shrouds, my brother's alleged handiwork covered out of respect for the dead. But one body was unveiled—a beautiful girl with flame-red hair. Her faeling eyes were closed forever now, hands crossed over her shattered breast in some attempt at repose.

"Duchess Yvaine was on her knees beside that slab. Her head hung low, her gown rent by her own hand, cheeks streaked with kohl and tears. But the girl at that slab's feet was deathly silent. Dior stood with palms pressed to the stone, ashen locks tumbling about her cheeks. She was dressed in white as ever, but a swordbelt encircled her slender waist now, Ashdrinker's broken blade sleeping in the scabbard. And as she looked up at us with eyes like blue ice, we saw the Holy Grail of San Michon was not weeping.

"She was *enraged.*

"'Tell me what happened.'

"'Dior, we grieve for y—'

"'*Now,* Celene.'

"We hung our head, dragging one lock behind our ear, fingers brushing cold porcelain. We realized what a fright we must look—that awful, savage grin scrawled in crimson upon bone white. The face beneath was ghastlier still, but at least it was *ours,* and in lieu of any other, we supposed we owed *some* kind of honesty here. So we slipped our mask off, and though the Duchess paled in horror, Dior stared unflinching.

"'Gabriel infiltrated the château,' we began. 'We know not how.'

"'Came in through the pumpworks, they think.' This murmur from Joaquin, stood sad and still behind us. 'His clothes were still wet when they brought him down.'

"'I mean what happened with Reyne,' Dior demanded.

"We hung our head. 'The Princess had met with the Duchess Yvaine—'

"'You were spying on her?'

"'We were watching her back, Dior. We cannot look out for you now you abide on holy ground. But we know how dear the Princess is to you.'

"We sighed, looking at that cold girl on that cold stone.

"'*Was* to you.'

"'What happened?' Dior whispered.

"'The Princess was … overjoyed after her conversation with the Duchess. Reyne was on her way to speak to you when she caught sight of Gabriel. He *let* her see him, we think. To lure her close. Mother Maryn and I sped at once to her side. But despite our warning, the Princess sought Gabriel out. He ambushed her. Questioned her. Yet even with a blade at her throat, the Princess refused to betray you.'

"Dior flinched at that, jaw clenched tight as she glanced at the girl she loved. And in that pause, we looked at our boots. Everything we'd spoken up to that point was truth. But there was no way to proceed now without lying to Dior's face. We had *never* done that. Not in all we'd been through. I wondered at the question Phoebe had asked me then; what the difference between madness and faith truly was. We knew good could come of evil. I could sacrifice truth for something I believed in. Especially one so hurtful.

"But this girl was my friend. *Celene Castia's* friend. And friends should not lie to each other, no matter how deep the truth might cut.

"'*O Lord of Love,*' we whispered. '*O God of Blood, O King of Wolf and Lamb…'*

"'Celene?'

"'The inquisitors found Gabriel and Reyne,' we told her. 'They attacked. We *begged* Reyne to run. But she was brave, your Princess. By the time Maryn and I arrived, Gabriel had laid the soldiers and Princess low. His fury was … impossible. He almost slew Maryn before he was forced to flee. It took a hundred men to bring him down.'

"Phoebe murmured, golden eyes agleam. 'They weren't gentle, Flower.'

"Dior's gaze burned like fire. 'You said Reyne was on her way to see me. Why?'

"'We'd spoken of her father.' It was the Duchess whispering now, Reyne's cold hand in hers. 'Hard news, but she seemed elated at it.'

"'Her father,' Dior repeated.

"'Laerd Ryan á Sadhbh.'

"Dior blinked, glancing at Phoebe. 'You told us—'

"'It seems Phoebe was mistaken, Dior,' we said. 'An innocent misstep.'

"'I'm sorry, Flower,' Phoebe breathed. 'I *swear* by my blood and breath, I thought it true. My Connor *did* love the Nineswords during the Highland Wars. But it seems he was nae the only one…'

"'Reyne was Laerd Ryan's get,' Yvaine said. 'One glance at the pair of them would've told you the truth of it. That's why Mother sent Reyne away to live with me.' The Duchess squeezed her sister's hand, tears coming anew as her accent finally slipped. 'Oh, my poor lamb, I should've *never* let ye go back to Maergenn town.'

"Dior looked at me, eyes wide, pulse pounding.

"'She wasn't…'

"'No, Dior. Reyne was not your sister.'

"She hung her head then. Nails scraping across Reyne's slab as her fingers curled into white-knuckled fists. Stomping her boot once upon the flagstones, she closed her eyes. We could not read her thoughts—as always, the Grail's mind was a locked room to us. But a blindworm could have seen her fury as she looked to us and spat.

"'Let's go see your brother.'

"She stalked toward the exit, snarling as Phoebe reached for her arm. And sharing a glance with the duskdancer, we followed, Joaquin and the Unbound hurrying in the Grail's wake. Down stone stairs she stalked, into the bowels of the Hall of Justice, gloomy light and iron bars and rows of stern guards. These were the dungeons of Augustin, deep in the city's foundations, grey and bleak and thick with winter's chill. Soldiers saluted as she passed, several murmuring blessings on this, her happiest of days. But Dior gave no reply; clenched teeth and hissing breath, white and boiling in the freezing dungeon air.

"Down long corridors, past ironclad doors, boots thumping cold stone. None among the Unbound spoke, but we could feel their turmoil; loyalty for their savior wrestling with the fear of what she might do. Finally, she rumbled to a halt outside a stone cell, fronted by thick iron bars. Two dozen guards in fullplate stood vigil outside it, blades unsheathed.

"'Open it,' Dior demanded.

"Their capitaine was a heavyset fellow with a scarred chin and thick moustache, almost half again Dior's height. 'My Lady Grail—'

"'Open the *cunting* door, Capitaine.'

"The man looked to his fellows, the Unbound, finally to Phoebe. The duskdancer shook her head softly, trying to dissuade him. But this fellow was no fool, and he along with this entire troop knew full well who Dior would be to the city of Augustin by day's end.

"'My Lady Grail,' the man nodded.

"As the big guard unlocked the door, we studied the pitiful wretch within, shaken by the sight of him. Even after his excommunication, Gabriel de León had been lauded as a savior of this realm, a hero of its people. Some had praised him all the more after his exile—the holy warrior who'd defied heaven for the sin of forbidden love. But now, his fall was complete. A murderer of Augustin's sons and daughters, drenched in royal blood.

"Tarnished silver.

"He hung from the ceiling, bound at wrists and ankles with only his toes touching the floor. A paleblood could break steel with enough motivation, but the soldiery of Augustin had taken no chances—the manacles were reinforced, triple sets of chain pinioning each limb, another his waist. He was stripped to his britches, silver ink gleaming on his skin. A veil of black hair was draped over his face, soaked with blood, but a glance told us how badly he'd been beaten. From the amount of sacrament he'd been dosed with yestereve, it would've taken a committed session of *true* brutality to have left a mark on him. But we could see such, sure and true; broken fingers, broken nose, broken ribs. From the scent, we knew the blood was mostly his, but we yet caught notes of last night's battle—the sanguine perfume of Maryn's ancient veins mingled with dead soldiers and poor Princess Reyne.

"'Wake up,' Dior demanded.

"Gabriel only groaned.

"'Wake *up,* bastard!'

"She snatched a pail of icy water from the cell floor, flung it into Gabriel's face. With a gasp, a sputter, my brother came slow to his senses. He took a moment to find himself, blinking hard, steel-grey eyes yet blurred. But finally, he focused on the figure before him, his whisper trembling with relief and heartbreak. When last he'd seen her, this girl had been a corpse. Their parting a final farewell. Despite it all, to see her alive and breathing now filled Gabriel with fire. The fire of purest love.

"'D-Dior, oh God, *Dior,* I—'

"'You killed her.'

"The words were spat, not spoken. Dior's teeth clenched, eyes ablaze.

"'You *murdered* her.'

"'M-murdered…'

"Gabriel blinked harder, realizing at last where he was. His eyes drifted from the irons at his wrist to the folk at Dior's back. A cadre of Unbound, mute and grim. Joaquin Marenn, pale and afeared. Phoebe á Dúnnsair, bloodless with grief.

"'Phoebe…' he whispered.

"The duskdancer hung her head, the gold in her braids singing softly. But Gabriel's eyes shifted to me then, sharp as glass, hissing between his fangs like a viper.

"'*You.*'

"The punch took him full in the face, split his lip upon his teeth. Dior hissed in pain, clutching her fist in her wounded hand as Gabriel's head snapped back on his neck. Lolling forward, swaying on his chains, he gazed through a veil of bloody hair, whispering.

"'Dior, you m-must li—'

"'I must NOTHING! You *KILLED* HER!'

"'Dior, n-no, I—'

"'You didn't need to do that! I don't give a *damn* what Voss promised you, I don't give a *fuck* if he slaved you! You didn't need to *hurt* her, Gabriel!'

"'I *didn't.*'

"Dior's face twisted, tears welling in her eyes but not yet fallen.

"'One thing,' she hissed. 'Just *one thing* that was mine, that's all I needed. You want my blood? Fucking take it! My hand? My body? My life? I'd give them all to end this hell! I just needed *one* drop, Gabriel. One inch! One miserable *scrap* of joy would've been enough! And I found her, you bastard. You miserable piece of shit. But it's always the same. *Always!* The ones I love either leave me or get taken away.'

"She gritted her teeth, tears finally spilling as she leaned close and hissed.

"'And *you* took her from me.'

"'Dior, I didn't hurt that girl. Godssakes, after what happened to ma famille…'

"He looked to the fleshwitch then, eyes pleading.

"'Phoebe, *t-tell* her.'

"The duskdancer's eyes welled with tears, her torture plain on her face. Every part of her screamed that she speak truth. Every part, save the blood in her veins.

"'Celene…'

"We met his eyes then. Grey like the ocean before a storm. Scrawled with blood and cracked by hunger. The eyes of a killer. A sinner. A brother. An ocean of hurt stretched between us, but still not so deep nor wide we couldn't have crossed it if we'd truly wished. We were still blood, after all. Always, Lions. But this was more than just we two. This was the fate of the world. Of every soul under heaven.

"Not just the greater good.

"The *greatest.*

"'Celene, Godssakes, *t-tell* her!'

"What is the difference between faith and madness, Historian?

"What are you prepared to sacrifice for what you believe?

"So we matched his gaze with our own.

"And we breathed not a word.

"'Dior, p-please.' Gabriel met her eyes, blood drooling from split lips. 'They're trying to t-turn you against me. The Esani *aren't* what you believe, I know it sounds like—'

"'Bullshit,' she spat. 'It sounds like bull*shit* from the mouth of a *murderer*!'

"'God*damn* you, girl, will you *fucking listen to m*—'

"'A LIAR!' she roared. 'A drunk! A waste of fucking skin who'll say *anything* and fuck *anyone* so long as it gets him back to his *real* daughter!'

"He flinched then, eyes welling with pain. 'Dior, you're as dear to me as m—'

"'Fuck you! *FUCK* YOU!'

"She fell on Gabriel then, screaming and punching and spitting. Joaquin stepped forward and she lashed out at him in turn, bellowing that no one was to touch her. Heartbroken, the houndboy backed off, looking to Dúnnsair and us to intercede as Dior reached to her waist and hauled Ashdrinker from her sheath. The sword sang as she drew it, poised in her trembling fist. Gabriel's eyes were fixed on the blade, lip trembling.

"'Oh, Ash…'

"He looked at Phoebe, heartbroken.

"'What did you *do…'*

"I could not feel Dior's thoughts. But her rage was incandescent, and in that moment, I truly believed she might run my brother through. I wondered how that would make me feel. Wondered if I should stop her. Wondered why, amid all the hue and cry in my skull, I heard Wulfric whisper Gabriel's name—the name of the son he'd never wanted. *Never* loved. But in the end it was Phoebe who caught Dior up, holding tight as she roared and bucked like a wild thing in the duskdancer's arms.

"'Let *GO* of me!'

"'Hush, Flower, let it be!'

"'Let me go, he killed her, he fucking KILLED HER!'

"'Clear a path!' Phoebe roared to the men behind her. 'Out of the way, damn ye!'

"'Dior!' Gabriel bellowed. 'Dior, *listen* TO ME!'

"'Take him to the Tower!' Dior spat, fixing the capitaine in her gaze as Phoebe dragged her from the cell. 'You hear me? Let the fucking Inquisition have him! I hope they cut your bollocks off, you fucking pig! I hope they hang you *skinless*!'

"Dior's roars faded as Phoebe dragged her up the corridor, still flailing and kicking, her Unbound trailing behind. Threats of hanging, dismemberment, other tortures more vile hung in the air, cut through with screams of rage and grief. We could see each one sink home, Gabriel's teeth gritted, tears spilling down his bloody cheeks. He had given all for that girl. Wagered his last coin and lost. And though he might have pledged allegiance to Voss, still I saw the love he bore her, broken now upon these jagged stones. Some loss is simply too bitter to swallow, Historian. Some hurts run so deep they can never be mended. Grim Father Time does not give. He only takes. And from my brother?

"He had taken *everything*.

"'When is he coming?'

"Gabriel looked up as we spoke. In his thoughts we felt pain, grief, rage, regret.

"'I didn't want it to b-be this way, sister.'

"'When is your master coming for Dior?'

"He shook his head, gaze falling away from me. 'B-but maybe it had to be.'

"We scowled, moving aside as the guards began unbinding the manacles at Gabriel's wrists and ankles. We knew there was wisdom in Dior's command—any knowledge Gabriel had about Voss's numbers or plans might be of use in dark nights ahead. But though the Tower of Tears was holy ground, and the Inquisition ostensibly in service to the Angel of Bliss, we knew their conversations would be *far* from polite. He was fallen far, but Gabriel de León had stood at the side of the angels once. Given blood and body and breath to defend this realm from the evil he now served.

"'How did it come to this, brother?'

"He scoffed then, blood drooling from his chin.

"'Your Lord moves in mysterious ways.'

"Gabriel shook his head and sighed.

"'I'll see you down in hell.'

"We walked from his cell, our own Inquisitorial escort falling into step behind us. Climbing the stairs to the halls above, we asked after Dior, informed that the Grail was headed to the Pontifex's Palace, there to begin preparations. The notion that the wedding would go ahead after all that had happened was a strange one, but still welcome. Truth was, we were *tired,* Historian. Of the blood. Of the lies. Of feeling torn between our faith and our sense of what was right, wondering how the former could feel so very far from the latter. This life could be cruel, we knew. These trials were sent to test us. But it was difficult sometimes to reconcile the idea of a creator who loved me with a life that looked like mine.

"That was the mystery of it, we supposed.

"The *mystery*.

"And we heard Wulfric's voice then. Echoing for months in our head, but fallen so very quiet these last few nights. Marching back across Place San Maximille with our escort, onward through the château, we searched every surface—gleaming blades and bunting-clad windows and polished suits of shining platemail—for some trace of his reflection. We saw nothing. Yet still we heard his voice, the night we'd both saved and stolen his life.

"*Thou art* ready, *Celene. For the final mystery of our faith.*

"The Lord moves in mysterious ways.

"*'What news, Liathe? '*

"Mother Maryn was waiting at her chamber door as we returned with our retinue. The marks of my brother's attack lingered on her skin, her voice cracked and graveled. But her eyes were smooth black orbs, boring into our own.

"'Dior is preparing for her wedding, Mother. She believed nothing Gabriel said. He is sent to the Tower of Tears, and the bloody keeping of the Inquisition.'

"She nodded, gaze falling on our guards. '*Goodly work, holy sons. Certain are we, his tongue shall be loosed in short order on matters of the Forever King's plans.*'

"The men said nothing, taking up their posts outside our rooms with eyes dead ahead. Though Gabriel de León was a murderer and heretic in the sight of the Inquisition, there was no love lost among their troops for we walking Dead either.

"We reached out to the Mother, thoughts touching hers, speaking without speech.

"*Gabriel will sing a different version of last night's events than ours, Mother.*

"*Let him. They shall think him a liar, singing to save his skin. Yet when celebrations are in full swing this eve … we should silence his song forever.*

"*He is in the Tower of Tears. We cannot enter holy ground.*

"*Dahtr á Dúnnsair suffers no such restraint.*

"Our eyes met Maryn's at that, a chill upon our skin at the cold we found waiting there, belied by the joyful smile on her lips. She gestured to the tall windows in the sitting room overlooking the plaza outside. Despite the weather, folk were gathered in multitudes now, crowded on bridges, some even scaling the great statue of San Maximille to get a better view of the royal couple as they'd enter the cathedral.

"*'We cannot attend mass. Shall we watch the happy day from here? '*

"'Forgive me, Mother.' We sighed, head hung low. 'But I am … wearied past all bearing. He is lost, but Gabriel was my brother once. I admit his fall weighs heavy. I must pray to Almighty God for solace and seek comfort in the arms of sleep.'

"Maryn nodded. '*These nights are sent to try us. Thou hast earned thy rest. We shall fetch thee afore the thanksfeast this eve. Though thou art sore burdened by thy holy works, still we should pay respects to bride and groom.*'

"'We will be ready.'

"Maryn took our hand then, eyes boring into our soul. We could feel her thoughts skimming ours, the weariness and doubt, the sorrow and hurt.

"*'The Battle for Augustin shall be the battle for our time, Celene. But with our faith, our fire, the Holy Grail shall seat herself upon the throne at Maidsfeast thereafter and unite earth and heaven as one. Hold fast now. Thou art a faithful servant of the Almighty, and thy devotion shall be rewarded in his eternal kingdom.*'

"'Véris, Mother.'

"*'Sleep well, child. Judgment Comes.*'

"We retired into our chambers, padding through our sitting room to the boudoir beyond. All was silent, save for the growing crowds outside, soft hymns and a thrum of voices beneath the thunder. But we were under no illusions we were alone. Maryn was surely watching us, a mote of her hid somewhere in the shadows as we kicked off our boots and stepped into our coffin. It was a plain affair: simple pine, unadorned, the same as we'd slept in during nights in San Yves. We fancied we heard the faint rustling of tiny wings as we cast off our coat, our mask, lay down on that rough wood and closed the lid.

"Dark awaited. Dark, and unwelcome thoughts.

"White ants chewing at our foundations.

"Salt water corroding our steel.

"He'd not killed us. Though he'd had every opportunity last night, Gabriel hadn't let his blade fall. If he was thralled to the monster who'd worked so hard to destroy Illia's dream, why stay his hand? Why spare an acolyte of Fabién's great enemy?

"Our mind was in tumult, same as it ever was in the presence of the Mother, all those voices within us raging like a storm in our skull. Yet amid that endless clamor, we'd still heard not a sound from Wulfric. No taunt, no word, no whisper. Instead, we heard only his son, our brother, words spoken to the Princess he'd never slain.

"*There's none under heaven who know better than me what a monster is Fabién Voss, girl. But he is nothing*—nothing—*compared to the monster we woke beneath Dún Maergenn.*

"*The Esani don't want to end daysdeath, girl. They want to—*

"*Thou art* ready*, Celene. For the final mystery of our faith …*

"We closed our eyes. Searched within. Pushing aside the anxiety, the doubt, the weight of what we might find in here. We still feared we were not strong enough for this. We still doubted this could work. Despite all our claims to the contrary, Celene Castia was not truly master of her own mind. She was master of nothing. But just as in that moment we'd been sunk beneath the Béni River in the Battle of Lastbridge, the weight of cold water and fear of death all around, I found myself again standing in the heart of that vast room. That room wrought only of my mind. Once again, the walls were circular, like some great cathedral—a thousand looking glasses, a thousand mirrors, a thousand pieces.

"Pieces of us.

"When last I'd stood here, in each bright surface I'd seen my old master's face. But now, each mirror was empty, reflecting only a pale girl in a red coat, black hair framing a bloodless face as she roared in the heart of that vast cathedral.

"'Where are you?'

"Figures appeared on that glass, a sea of familiar faces, shouting, hissing, cursing; Victorine and Octavia and Dmitri, Alexandra and Anastasia and Aléne. My victories. My victims. Souls rescued from eternal perdition, though in truth none had asked for salvation. We wondered now what they might have said if given a choice. But we'd no use for any of them in that moment, fists clenched, fangs bared as we roared into the glass.

"*'SILENCE! '*

"The cathedral fell still, the shouting ceased, the mirrors of me emptied once more. I prowled about that circle, staring into blank planes of glass, shout echoing in the still.

"'Are you afraid to face me? All these months, you've haunted my every turn, and now at the eleventh hour, you fall silent? We stand at the fruition of Illia's dream! All you worked for soon to come to pass, and you've nothing at all to say?'

"Silence my answer. Silence complete. I prowled that silvered hall, teeth bared.

"'I heard you call his name! Your *son*! They're going to torture him, Wulfric! Your beloved Auriél's baby boy is going to die screaming; have you no words for him?'

"I caught a glimpse then. A tremor across that glass.

"But he did not show his face.

"'What did he mean? If Maryn doesn't want to end daysdeath, what *does* she want? What did Illia want, that a creature like Voss labored so hard to foil her design? If we are all God's monsters, what monstrosity do we toil to bring upon this earth?'

"My fists were clenched, screams echoing in the still.

"'You *owe* me! Even after you fell, I took up your mantle! *I* found the Grail! *I* bled to save her! *I* brought her through fire and blood to the gates of Augustin! You told me I earned this! The final mystery! Well, now I claim my due!'

"I realized I was crying. Tears of blood running down my cheeks. I felt all I was and had ever been crumbling beneath my feet. Not just the pillars that held up my sky, but the foundation upon which I was built. Ever since that night I had entered Wulfric's service, I had clung to the hope that through Illia's teachings, my soul might be saved. All I had done, all I had been, was built around that single article of faith. And I knew that *all* believers must suffer a moment like this—this dark night of the soul in which doubt takes root and you stare into the mirror and speak those terrible words:

"*Am I a fool?*

"Good could come of evil. Evil of good. The world is not black-and-white, but grey. One life was not so much to sacrifice to save a million. But one life taken is not just one life *lost,* is it? How many had I killed in the name of Faith? How many orphans and widows had I made, when I took those sinners from this earth? And how is it in the space of a few short years, I had gone from justifying the execution of rapists and brutes to turning a blind eye at the murder of innocents? Reyne á Maergenn sat now at the right hand of the Father, oui. But she'd not asked for salvation. And I knew what she'd have said if given a choice.

"She'd have chosen Dior.

"My *friend.*

"Though my hand was not on that blade, I'd surely helped to hide it afterward. And it seemed here, in the very last inch of her, in the quiet of her own mind, *that* was more than Celene Castia was prepared to sacrifice for what she believed.

"'Say nothing, then,' I hissed. 'But I'll be *damned* if I do the same.'

"I turned to leave, pawing at the blood on my face.

"*What shall ye do?*

"We froze, his voice holding us still. And turning back, we saw him, hundreds of him, reflected over and over in those pieces of me. Long black hair and ink-black eyes and a face we'd once adored. He'd offered us salvation, remember. Given us a place to belong. A faith to belong to. A slender beam of hope in a world gone utterly dark.

"'I'll stop the wedding. I'll go right now and tell Dior what Maryn did.'

"*Maryn shall ne'er allow thee to foil her design,* Wulfric replied. *She is everywhere. She watches* everything. *Take one misstep, give her* one *reason to doubt thee, and she can simply wrest the treachery from thy mind.*

"'Truth is not treachery,' we spat.

"*We are close, Celene,* he said, hands to the glass. *So close to the end of all we hath worked for. A* thousand *years, the writing of this story. Ye do not understand—*

"'Then *make* me understand! Tell me the *truth*!'

"His lips peeled back, fangs gleaming. But still he gave no answer.

"'Tell me,' I spat, stalking forward. 'Tell me, or I *will* tell Dior. I will tear the final page from that story and burn it on the pyre! I will unmake everything the Esana have made!'

"*Maryn shall destroy thee first.*

"'And if she does, she damns you, me, *all* of us in here to the fires of hell.'

"Wulfric glowered at that, eyes narrowed to knifecuts in that beautiful face. The mirrors around us rippled, warped, and beyond our master, we saw them all; that legion of victims, that choir of souls, that sea of sinners that encompassed all we were.

"*Ye would not dare. Ye long for heavenly skies as much as I.*

"'Maybe we don't deserve heaven, Wulfric,' I replied, tears spilling down my cheeks. 'Maybe we all of us *earned* damnation. Tonight and a thousand nights before.'

"He quavered then. The choir of souls screaming about him.

"'Tell me,' I hissed. 'Tell me, or by God we *all* burn.'

"I stepped forward, pinning him in our gaze, Gabriel's words echoing in our head.

"'The blackened veil. It's not daysdeath, is it?'

"… *Nay.*

"'If we're not working to end the endless night … what *are* we working to end?'

"He met our eyes then. This man who'd saved me. This monster who'd made me. I could see the conflict in him, right to his root. If the world was not black-and-white, then neither was Wulfric. He was a creature of many moods, my master. One moment cold and cruel, the next, warm as mulled wine. He'd murdered thousands, kith and mortal, drenched in the blood of centuries and the carnage of the Red Crusade. And yet he'd loved my mama. Saved his son's life when she asked. Wept when she died. Despite it all, the centuries and the blood, some small part of him was still human.

"I think that was the part that answered me.

"*The world, Celene. We want to end this cursed world.*"

A pounding rang upon the cell door, interrupting the Last Liathe's tale. She fell silent, one brow raised, looking toward the historian. Jean-François glanced up from his tome, quill poised in trembling fingers, groaning all the way from his boots.

"You must be bloody *jesting*."

The cell door swung wide, and there on the threshold stood young Dario. The thrall's face was pale, sheened with sweat, the toll taken by his exertions with the silversaint the previous night obviously worsened by the flat-out dash he'd taken to get down here.

"M-Master. Empress Margot has r-returned from her hunt."

Jean-François clenched his jaw, the enormity of what the Liathe had told him sinking home. All who knew of them spoke of the Esani with fear, but he'd no clue how terrifying their faith *truly* was. Yet he had little opportunity to process, looking instead to the thrall.

"With de León? Or did the Maiden catch him first?"

"The Empress h-has the silversaint." The boy swallowed, his face bloodless. "What's l-left of him, at any rate. She demands your presence in the throne room immediately."

"*Now?* I'm just about t—"

"Forgive me, Master. She was *most* insistent."

Jean-François cursed. He'd half a mind to push on; to wring full revelation from this dog's throat. But memories of his mother's displeasure outweighed the deepest curiosity, and he knew keeping the Empress of Wolves and Men waiting was unwise. The historian glanced to the Last Liathe, sat upon the stone, a slow smile spreading across her lips.

"Seems we're all *someone's* dog."

He slammed the tome shut, eschewing his usual fastidiousness and packing up his quill and ink with hands ablur. Jean-François was out of his leather armchair and halfway toward the door when Celene's voice brought him up short.

“Use it wisely, Marquis.”

He turned back then, blue eyes narrowed.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The forever Gabriel gave you. Use it wisely.”

“Master, *please…”* Dario whispered.

Jean-François stared a moment longer, across the black river and into her eyes. There was so much more to unearth here. He stood so tantalizingly close to the brink. But the echo of his mother’s slap rang in his skull, the fear of her displeasure burning bright enough to blind, and, tome under his arm, he snarled at the thrall.

“Seal and lock this door. None shall enter but I and those under the Empress’s express command, do you understand?”

“Your will be done, Master.”

Fangs clenched, cursing under his breath, the historian swept from the room.

XIII

FRIENDSHIP

JEAN-FRANÇOIS DASHED UP the winding stair, boots striking the stones so swift his cadre of thrallswords were struggling to keep pace. The agony in his mauled nethers had subsided to a gnawing ache now, but still he was struggling as he crested the stairs. The historian emerged into the grand hallway of the château above, limping past the doors of Phaedra and Mahné, the dread twins regarding him silently.

A gaggle of deathless courtiers in Chastain colors was there gathered. Chatter hushed as he appeared, and several scandalized glances were aimed his way, whispers tickling cold skin. Among the sycophants and smiling assassins of Margot's court, Jean-François spied a dozen unfamiliar faces. They were all beautiful, clad in velvet and silk and deliciously tight leathers, and upon lapels and cuffs he spotted motifs of serpents and roses. But despite the instinctive hostility he felt at the presence of so many strangers in his home, the Marquis made his way toward the throne room with nary a glance for any.

"Uncle, have you *heard* th—"

"Not now, Nicolette," he sang, slipping his blood-niece's clutches.

Nicolette pouted, clutching her little rat-dog to her bosom, obviously disappointed at his refusal to indulge her thirst for gossip. But Jean-François paid no mind, limping through the gathered court and up the grand stairwell, wondering how swift his pulse would now be racing if his dead heart still beat.

Though the storm outside raged unabated, night itself was failing now. Dawn rapped its knuckles faintly upon towering stained-glass windows, muddied shadows in rainbow colors thrown long upon the floor. Jean-François's footfalls echoed on high-flung ceilings as he ascended the château's four towering levels, past the beautiful frescoes adorning the walls; heaven and earth and all between. Reaching Sul Adair's highest tier, those bare walls adorned with the portraits he'd so lovingly painted, the historian took a moment to straighten his frockcoat, smooth back his golden locks. The thralls outside his mother's throne room looked uneasy, faces ashen beneath their helms. Jean-François saw bloodstains on the carpet as he approached the towering doors. He was acquainted enough with its perfume by now to know exactly who it belonged to.

The doors were drawn open, one of the guards calling.

"Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain, Historian of Her Grace, Margot Chastain, First and Last of Her Name, Undying Empress of Wolves and Men."

Jean-François nodded thanks, adjusting his cravat. He spared a thought for Meline at that moment—it was his majordomo who'd announced him last time he entered this chamber. Had he but known it would be her last …

What? he asked himself. *Would you have pretended to care?*

The wolf frets not for the ills of the worm.

The presence struck the Marquis as soon as he crossed the threshold, like the kiss of a new lover upon the nape of his neck. Jean-François shivered as he walked into the grand chamber beyond. The beautiful song of a lone castrato drifted from the shadows, pillars stretched into the dark overhead. A river of crimson carpet marked the road forward, Jean-François noting more bloodstains beneath his feet.

Tome in his arms, he walked toward the dais at the end of the room. The closer he drew, the more that delightful warmth faded, doing battle with a chill hanging deeper, older in the air. Margot's throne awaited ahead, the magnificent, if not altogether realistic, portrait of the Empress he'd painted looming behind it. She stared at him from his canvas, that Empress of Wolves and Men, eyes black as storm-lashed skies above.

Around the throne at her feet, seven figures waited.

The first four, her wolves, of course. Malice. Valor. Prudence. Fealty. Black and fierce, they lounged upon the dais, blood-red eyes following the Marquis.

His mother next, resplendent upon her throne, eyes fixed on his. The Empress Margot was clad in a magnificent gown of midnight black, dark pearls about her neck and laced in her braids. She'd not returned from her hunt unscathed, he saw—a dark handprint was scorched upon the pale marble of her throat. Well did Jean-François know her pain, hand drifting to his own wounds as he glowered at the source of them.

The Last Silversaint lay sprawled before Margot's throne, so still and pale that, for a moment, Jean-François thought he might be dead. His leathers and flesh were torn, and he was covered in blood, its perfume sending a thrill through the historian despite himself. Gabriel's right leg had been mauled to the bone, and beneath the matted hair and blood, the historian saw where once two neat teardrop scars had trailed beneath the storm grey of the silversaint's right eye, four great furrows were now torn through brow and cheek.

The eye itself was gone entirely.

But not long did Jean-François's gaze linger on Gabriel's hurts. As he studied the fallen 'saint, not quite sure how to feel, again that shower of warm kisses tickled the back of his neck, turning him now to regard the last figure in the room.

He was to *beautiful* as an ocean is to a raindrop. As the sun is to the moons. He looked Sūdhaemi by birth, long braids of black hair trailing over broad shoulders, threaded with tiny trinkets of gold. He wore a frockcoat and britches of grey velvet brocade, a golden serpent with eyes of dark opal pinning his cravat. His skin was not marble but obsidian, his eyes black as oblivion. Looking upon this creature, Jean-François could not help but think of Gabriel's description of the ancien he slew in the cathedral of León.

Bleakest beauty.

Death divine.

"Kariim Ilon of the Blood Ilon, eldest of his line, and Priori of Whispers," Margot said. "May I present my youngest, the Marquis Jean-François."

"Art thou not a *beauty*," the vampire breathed.

The creature named Kariim stepped forward without seeming to move, molten, serpentine, reaching out with one hand to press the gentlest caress upon Jean-François's cheek. At the merest touch of those fingertips, the Marquis was undone, knees buckling, lashes fluttering as that beautiful creature swept him into his arms, enfolding him in an embrace deep and soft and silken, a low moan slipping his teeth as those hands wandered, those lips drifted closer, those eyes swallowed him whole, dragging him down, down into a place where there was not wanting, only *needing,* only—

"Jean-François," Margot said.

The Marquis blinked, coming back to himself. He was stood before that throne again, his Empress regarding him with one brow slightly arched. The Priori of the Whispers had not moved at all, regarding the historian with night-black eyes and the ghost of a smile. The Marquis realized he would have done almost *anything* in that moment to see that smile come full to bloom. To be wrapped in that silken embrace.

And Jean-François understood then why they called this one the Spider.

"Priori," he said, bowing low. "It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

“Of that,” Kariim inclined his head, “we are certain.”

That black gaze shifted to the Empress, smile fading.

“But of little else, we fear. Where be the Draigann, cousin Margot? Where be Kestrel? Assured were we, thy convocation would be attended by Priorem of each line. While the bait ’pon thy hook hath appetites whet”—here, those black eyes drifted to the bloodied wretch on the floor—“not merely for lion’s blood hath we journeyed so far.”

“Well we know it, cousin,” Margot replied. “And well we know thy concerns.”

“Concerns? Like a cow for her lost calf? Nay, we be not concerned, cousin. The Voss are prowling about Madeisa, Margot. And Dyvok rabble hath already bloodied Sul Ilham—both domains long held by the brood of Ilon. We Whispers crush no countries. Covet no crowns. But our nests are *ours*. Should affronts continue, there shall be … unpleasantness.”

“Be at peace, cousin,” Margot replied. “The Draigann and Maiden were at hunt. They return e’en now to Sul Adair. Long nights and roads hast thou journeyed to our halls. Pray ye, take pause to wash away the stains of thy road, and a moment for thy cohort to cast off storm’s chill. Soon enough shall thy grievances be heard, I swear thee.”

The Spider regarded Margot silently, fingertips pressed lightly together. Truth told, Jean-François was yet struggling to keep hold of his wits in the presence of the Ilon Priori. Though he knew these feelings were simply the gifts of the ancien’s blood at work, there was nothing *simple* about them. To behold this creature was to covet him. To be near him was to be not near enough. As Kariim turned that gaze upon him, the historian was so lost in the spell of his eyes, he almost didn’t hear the Priori speak.

“And what of this beauty? Be it here at purpose, or simply for distraction?”

“My son hath a gift for me,” the Empress replied. “Doth he not?”

The historian came to his senses, sinking to one knee and proffering his tome.

“My Empress. I pray my work this night pleases you.”

Margot made no reply, still radiating a mild displeasure as she took the history from Jean-François’s hands. With the swiftness of her ancien Chastain blood, Margot read the tome, flipping through the pages with the sound of a hummingbird at wing. Her black gaze swept every line, consumed every word, missing no moment nor morsel. But though the tome was the product of a full night’s testimony, the Empress devoured the entire history cover to cover in only a handful of heartbeats.

“This be unfinished,” she declared, piercing him with her stare.

“I fear my time with the Liathe was cut short by your summons, Empress. But—”

“Liathe.”

Kariim's eyes narrowed at the word.

"What doth he mean, *Liathe*? The Knights of the Blood extinguished that contemptible line centuries ago. Thee and I both witnessed Charbourg's fall, Margot."

The Empress smiled. "As ye said, sweet Kariim; not merely for lion's blood hath we invited thee to our halls. The Blood Chastain have much more to offer thee, should the brood of Ilon prove themselves the faithful friends we know ye to be. But Kestrel be impatient, Kariim. The Iron Maiden mourns her father with the fury of any loyal daughter, but she presses for too-swift vengeance 'gainst his murderer."

Kariim's eyes drifted to the bloody wretch on the floor.

"Well she should. T'was not only the eldest Voss who died by this rat's teeth."

"This rodent hath maimed us all. But Gabriel de León hath a truth in him we would glean afore his end. A truth methinks the Voss would dear love to keep buried."

Kariim raised one brow as the Empress smiled.

"Blood Chastain may be inclined to share this truth with our friends," she said. "And likewise rebuke any who intrude upon their domains. If friends we continue to be."

Margot tilted her head, glancing to the fallen 'saint.

"A few hours more with him will suffice, Kariim."

A boom sounded through the chamber as those mighty doors were flung wide, echoing on the rafters along with the thrallsword's cry.

"Kestrel Voss of Blood Voss, daughter of Fabién, eldest and Priori of the Ironhearts!"

The Empress and the Spider stared only at each other, but the historian turned to watch the Maiden approach. Stalking down the bloody carpet with fists clenched, Kestrel was clad in dark plate, the bloody death's-head on her face dried and flaking at the claws of the mountain winds. Her cloak of heartsblood red billowed in her wake, shoulders crowned with unmelted snows. Her footfalls rang like thunder in the gables, stormclouds over her brow as she reached the throne and spared Margot the briefest sort of bow.

"*Empress.*"

Kariim bowed. "Dearest Kestrel."

The Maiden's black gaze flickered to the Spider. "*Good Kariim.*"

"Glorious as ever, thy countenance. Our heart brightens to set wond'ring eyes 'pon thee once more. Tell me, dark Maiden, how long hath it been since we danced?"

"*Long enough for scars to have faded.*"

Kariim smiled, dark and wicked. "But their memory lingers, I wager."

Kestrel somehow ignored that perilous smile, turning instead to Margot.

"*Ye run swift, Empress.*"

"And hunt the swifter," Margot replied.

"*Our compliments. And thanks heartfelt, for bringing this dog to ground.*"

Kestrel's gaze shifted to the body at her feet, fury boiling in her gaze.

"*All that remains is to put him down.*"

The Maiden stooped toward the silversaint, Jean-François's jaw clenching as her claws closed upon the back of his neck. Gabriel de León had hurt him, oui, and not merely in the flesh—Celene had cut close to the bone when she'd intimated there was true fondness in the historian for his subject. Gabriel de León was a bastard, sure and true. But truth told, he was a *magnificent* bastard who'd spared Jean-François's life when he could have ended it. And to bear mute witness while he was butchered by this beast—

"We forbid it."

Kestrel paused, glowering at Margot's command.

"*Forbid? Empress's laurels hast thou claimed, but no fealty to thee hath I sworn. I am Priori of Ironheart. Eldest of Voss. No lackey I, to be forbid by thee.*"

"The hospitality of Blood Chastain shall not be besmirched." Margot leaned forward, pinning the Maiden in her gaze. "Ye stand in my halls *now,* Kestrel."

"*Journeyed we to these halls under promise justice would be served. And not alone are we in such desire, I wager. This pig be drenched in blood of eldest Voss and Ilon alike.*"

Kariim met Kestrel's stare, inclining his head.

"Indeed."

The Maiden returned the nod, turning expectant gaze upon Margot.

"We surely mean no offense, Empress," the Spider said, palms upturned. "We are thy guests, of course, and not so uncivilized we should disobey laws of courtesy. Yet the crimes this man hath committed 'gainst Whisper and Ironheart be without peer."

"*Indeed,*" Kestrel snarled.

"We trust the finale thou hast arranged for him will be … *spectacular*?"

The Empress met the Spider's stare, lips curled ever so slight.

"Indeed. Friend Kariim."

Kestrel blinked. "*Finale?*"

"Of course, dark Maiden."

The Spider smiled, all pearl-white fangs and night-black majesty, and though it was aimed at Kestrel, Jean-François still felt himself shiver in delight.

"The affront this man hath committed 'gainst us be without peer. His suff'ring should be likewise peerless. No doubt hath I, that the great Empress of Wolves and Men hath arranged an execution worthy of the ages."

Margot inclined her head.

"God and angels shall avert their gaze."

"But pray ye, great Empress," Kariim pleaded, raising his hands in surrender. “Might this entertainment be postponed for but one more eve? Dawn’s feeble light aready presses ’pon these walls, and long miles hath we come through snow and storm. I would wash the road’s filth from mine cloak, warm mine cold bones by the blood of some ripe young thing, and steal a few hours of sleep dreamless afore we rise again to witness the delicious horrors thou hast in store for our father’s murderer.”

Kariim glanced to the Maiden, brow slightly raised.

“Mayhaps we might dine together? With no small fondness do I recall past meals.”

Kestrel met the Spider’s eyes, tongue pressed to the tip of one fang. Jean-François could feel the air smoldering between them, almost pitying whatever morsel the Empress provided to slake their thirsts. Turning to the Empress, the Iron Maiden planted a savage kick in Gabriel’s ribs, the sound of cracking bone and a soft wheeze the only reply.

“*Tonight, Empress, Gabriel de León dies.*”

Margot smiled. “Screaming.”

“Draigann Dyvok of Blood Dyvok, son of Lilidh, eldest and Priori of the Untamed!”

Kariim pursed his lips as the cry echoed on the walls.

“Oh, bless. The pup hath escaped his kennel and bounds forth with tail awag. Forgive me, Empress. But I shall absent myself afore he begins soiling thy carpets.” The Spider offered his arm to the Maiden. “Shall we dine?”

“*Indeed.*”

The Maiden took the Spider’s arm, and side by side, the pair walked down the carpet toward the approaching Draigann. Yet within a few steps, Kariim paused, turning back to Jean-François, *swallowing* him with his eyes.

“Wouldst thou join us, beauty?”

Jean-François stammered, mouth dry as ash. But Margot replied in his stead.

“Forgive him, Priori. But my son hath labors to conclude afore the dusk.”

The Spider looked Jean-François up and down.

“Pity.”

And with no backward glance, the Priorem of Voss and Ilon turned away.

The pair passed the Draigann as he stalked toward Margot’s throne, sparing the young Dyvok only the briefest of courtesies. The Priori of the Untamed looked half confused, half affronted, scowling back over his shoulder at the departing couple as he rumbled to a halt before Margot’s throne. Golden fangs glinted as he growled.

“The hell is that slick cunt?”

Margot made no reply, eyes fixed on her son.

“What did I miss?” the Draigann demanded, looking between the pair.

“Grim Father Time hath caught thee, Jean-François,” Margot said, ignoring the Draigann utterly. “I desire telling of how the cup was broken.

The reason *why* Voss coveted it, when at Charbourg we labored to annihilate its line. I care not by what means thou shalt acquire it. No regard hath I for thy pains. A handful of hours hast thou, until coming of dusk. And when this wretched sun sets, thou shalt bring me the truth of it, or thou shall die screaming beside this wretch and his sister, test me not."

Jean-François bowed low.

"My Empress."

Margot snapped her fingers, and a cadre of thralls in Chastain livery marched from the shadows, heavy boots ringing on cold stone. The Empress of Wolves and Men waved to the bloodied wretch upon the floor.

"Take that below with my son."

The soldiers bowed, one stooping to heft the silversaint off the floor. Blood drooled from Gabriel's slackened jaw, head lolling as though his neck was already snapped. But Jean-François could yet hear the soft thump of Gabriel's heart, marveling at its stubbornness, at this fool's refusal to simply die. He wondered what kept the silversaint going. What point there was for this man to linger in a world where all hope was lost. And why had he run? There was no escape through these mountains, unprovisioned and on foot in a raging storm. Surely he'd known it was only a matter of time until he was recaptured?

Why had he not simply ended it? Spared himself these tortures while he had the chance? Was the Last Silversaint so afraid to face the hell awaiting him?

Or was he too foolish to realize he was already dead?

"Jean-François."

He glanced up from his musings, into the eyes of the thing who'd made him.

"Empress?"

"Fail me not."

He bowed low, hand to heart.

"Thy will be done."

BOOK FIVE

REDEEMER

All Shall Kneel.

—The Creed of Blood Voss

I

A LEGEND LIVING

JEAN-FRANÇOIS SIGHED AS the Last Silversaint finally opened his eye.

The holy sacrament hadn't managed to rouse him from his beating, though in truth the historian had little idea what he was doing administering it. He knew sanctus needed to be smoked in a particular fashion; the flame held a precise distance from the bowl, lest the blood burn rather than vaporize. But the smoke drifting from the sticky powder had been black, not red, and besides, Gabriel was not conscious enough to inhale much. The historian had cast aside the pipe in disgust.

He'd tried mortal blood next, spilled by an ever-obliging Dario into a goblet of gold. But though the 'saint had stirred when Jean-François pressed the cup to his lips, he'd not woken fully, groaning and dribbling the best of the draught down his stubbled chin.

"Hell with it, then," the historian had hissed.

And biting his wrist, he'd pressed it to Gabriel's lips.

That had woken him, sure and true, his one good eye snapping open. Gabriel's pupil had dilated, that hunger Jean-François now knew all too well rising swift to surface. And latching hold of his wrist as if on to life itself, the Last Silversaint had begun to drink.

One mouthful, two, the historian shivering in delight as he felt the silversaint's teeth sink into his skin. But the pain at his nethers served as grim reminder of how dangerous this serpent in his arms was, and Jean-François allowed Gabriel only one more swallow before snatching back his wrist and punching the silversaint full in the face.

Knuckles cracked bone, Jean-François wincing at the sting. Gabriel's head snapped sideways, his mouth tore loose as he collapsed back onto the cold stone floor. Jean-François rose to his feet, licking his wounded wrist and spitting.

"That's for my balls, bastard."

Despite his obvious pain, the gouges and bites and tears all over his body, the Last Silversaint levered himself onto one elbow and somehow managed to chuckle.

"They'll grow b-back, Chastain."

"Unlike your eye."

Gabriel reached up with one unsteady hand, touching his bloodied face. Four great rends from the Empress's claws were torn down brow and cheek, obliterating his teardrop scars and one storm-grey eye besides. Thanks to the historian's blood, the 'saint's wounds had already begun healing—the bone-deep gouges in his leg, the rends across chest and forearms had not vanished entirely, but at least they'd stopped bleeding. Yet what had been taken completely could never be given back.

"God gave me two," Gabriel sighed.

"Véris."

He looked across the river then, toward the monster who had spoken. His eye narrowed, his lip curled, voice dripping with venom.

"Sister."

"Brother."

"Traitor."

"Coward."

"*Enough,*" Jean-François snapped.

With a moan of agony, the silversaint pushed himself up to sitting. He was on the cold floor of the Liathe's cell, deep beneath the château. Long shadows danced upon the stone, thrown by the burning torches in the hands of the thrallsword cadre. There were two dozen of them, armed to the teeth and clad in Chastain tabards and fullplate, staring at the silversaint with the look of men simply *begging* for a murder.

"Boys," he nodded.

Jean-François sat in the velvet armchair at water's edge, Dario pouring a goblet of blood. The chymical globe on the table lit the boy's handsome face, scowling as he brushed away that bothersome white moth. The Marquis's march back down from the throne room had been quieter than his ascent—with dawn's arrival, most of Margot's court had retired to their boudoirs, a willing thrall or visiting dignitary or perhaps even both for company. He'd caught sight of Nicolette on the arm of a dark-haired Ilon beauty, some strapping young thrall draped between the femmes. With an arched brow, the Viscontessa had invited her uncle to come up and play, but the Marquis had been forced to demur, slinking back into the building's bowels. Jean-François could imagine the debauchery going on upstairs with very little effort, and the fact he was stuck down in this cell with this pair of pricks had him in the foulest of moods.

"Sit your arse down, de León. Let's get this over with."

"Or wh-what?"

The historian felt Dario tense, the thralls about him bristle. With one steady hand, he reached for the goblet of blood, taking a small sip and clearing his throat.

"I beg your pardon?"

The Last Silversaint glanced to his sister, fixed the historian with his one good eye.

"The deal we struck is obviously off the t-table. I've upset your mama far too m-much for her to grant any final r-requests. So I asked *Or what,* Chastain."

The Marquis put down his goblet and sighed.

"Capitaine?"

The thrall's fist came down like thunder from Gabriel's blind side, cracking across his wounded cheek. Whatever mending the historian's blood had managed was unmade in an instant, those gouges torn anew, the silversaint collapsing with a grunt. More thralls descended, swift and savage, dancing on the silversaint's ribs with their boots. These had been the fellows who'd cleared away the remnants of Delphine and his cadre after Gabriel's escape, and they were obviously keen to even the scales.

Dario watched the beating with hammering heart, but the historian's eyes were fixed across the river. Celene sat at the water's edge, fingers entwined, rivers of long black hair framing delicate features. He searched the Liathe's face for some hint of pity as she watched her brother being thrashed. But the Lion's little Hellion only stifled a yawn as the sounds of pulping flesh and cracking bone rang above the river's song.

"En-nough," came the groan.

Jean-François studied his fingernails, buffing a speck on his lapel.

"*FUCKSSAKES ENOUGH!"* Gabriel roared.

"Very good, messieurs," Jean-François called. "That will do for now, merci."

A few last kicks sank home before the thrall cadre obeyed, stepping back with blood-splashed boots. The Last Silversaint was curled into a ball, torn hands about his face, the stone beneath him spattered crimson. Wheezing once. Coughing red.

Jean-François glanced to Dario, waved impatiently at the bottle of blood on the table. The boy approached as if the fallen saint was a coiled serpent, placing the half-filled bottle on the stone and retreating quickly to his master's side.

Celene watched as Gabriel rolled onto his elbows and knees, coughing more red. His split brow was pressed to the stone, hair tumbled over his mauled face, blood and spittle drooling from his teeth. He reached out, skinned knuckles and silvered fingers scrabbling for the bottle. Tilting his head back, he pressed it to the ribbons of his lips, guzzling the lot without pause, rivulets of red spilling down his chin.

Tongue probing the bottle's lip for the dregs, the Last Silversaint tossed it aside with a crash. Fixing Jean-François with his remaining eye, he licked split lips and nodded.

"G-good point. Well m-made."

"Pathetic."

Gabriel glanced to Celene as she whispered, eye narrowed.

"Fuck yourself."

The Last Liathe pressed one hand to her dead heart, wincing. "A hit. Nay, a *wound*. How can one muster defense against such scintillating w—"

"Capitaine, if Mlle Castia continues to trade barbs with her brother, please light the stone under her scrawny backside so I might enjoy the melody of her screams."

Jean-François glanced across the river, meeting the Liathe's eyes. The stink of oil still hung heavy in the air, the rock floor beneath her gleaming, and the historian's lips curled in a small but very smug smile as the Liathe shut her trap. Reaching into his frockcoat, Jean-François fetched quill and ink, lifting his history onto his lap. Reaching across the table, he patted the seat of the armchair opposite, whistling as if to a favored hound.

"Here, boy."

The historian busied himself with finding his place in the pages, but his smile only swelled as he heard the silversaint hauling himself upright. With a bubbling cough, Gabriel limped across the bloody stone toward the water's edge. He paused briefly, blinking at the pale bone pipe Jean-François had cast aside, groaning as he stooped to fetch it. But with a long hiss of pain, he soon collapsed into the chair beside the historian.

"Good dog," Jean-François murmured.

Celene sat silently on oily stone, watching as Jean-François dipped his quill. All was silent save for the river's laughter, the breath of waiting thralls, the rattle in Gabriel's chest as he struggled to breathe. Jean-François cleared his throat.

"Your sister has been kind enough to speak of events in Augustin leading up to the Grail's wedding. But there is a gap here, de León. One we need to fill."

"Speaking of, where's your girl?" Gabriel asked softly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Meline. I left her breathing, where is she?"

Silence was the only answer given.

The silversaint slowly nodded.

"When last we spoke," Jean-François continued, "you told me of the ill-fated attack on San Maximille. Your army's defeat by the Endless Legion. The revelation that your daughter Patience had risen Dead, broodchild of Fabién, and Prince of Forever. Your sister covered your failed attempt to steal the Grail, and the murder of Reyne á Maergenn."

The siblings glowered at each other then, eyes brimming with accusation and rage. But the historian was secretly delighted that neither uttered a word.

"But as I say, there is a gulf here, Silversaint. One I find difficult to bridge. I am wondering what happened between the moment you accepted Fabién's invitation into his home, and the moment Reyne discovered you in Château Impérial. I am wondering what possessed the husband of a murdered wife, and the father of a daughter Dead, to throw in with the monster responsible for both. A creature he hated more than any on earth."

"Almost," Gabriel murmured.

Jean-François looked up from his tome. He saw the silversaint was still staring across the river, eye fixed upon his sister.

When they'd first met, when Jean-François stepped into his cell what now felt a lifetime ago, the Last Silversaint had seemed a *giant*. It was a sad truth, but great men must usually die before they became immortal, the tale of their lives glorified only after their endings. But Gabriel de León was a legend *living*. A man who had begun carving his story upon history's page almost as soon as that story had begun.

As Gabriel stared at Celene, Jean-François could see pain in his gaze. Loathing. A rage that burned bright enough to best the sun. But the man himself seemed small now. Very small, and *very* tired. Red scrawl at the edges of his eye, red ribbons sliced through the silver on his skin. His knuckles were bloodied, fingers trembling about that pipe of bone as he tore his eye from Celene's, meeting Jean-François's.

"I could do with a smoke, Chastain."

"Say please."

Gabriel's jaw clenched, rage swelling in storm grey. All in the room knew he could probably kill Jean-François before the thralls cut him down. But common sense conquered any desire for pointless heroics.

"… Please."

The historian stared, savoring the suffering in that bloodshot eye. But there was surprisingly little joy in kicking a dog already down, and truth told, Jean-François was sick to the eyeteeth of all this. And so, he reached into his frockcoat for a vial of sticky red.

Despite the loss of his eye, the silversaint caught the sanctus unerringly. With shaking, bloodied hands he packed the pipe's bowl, patting his pockets in search of a flintbox all knew wasn't there. With a nod to one of the thralls, Jean-François bid him closer, and Gabriel brushed bloody hair back from sticky cheeks, lighting the pipe on the thrall's torch. The sacrament bubbled, dark chymistrie flooding into the silversaint's veins. Jean-François watched it take hold, calming the tremors in the Lion's hands, slowly closing the worst of his wounds. Gabriel held his breath, eye closed, dozens of heartbeats unmoving. Exhaling red, he leaned back and sighed from the depths of his broken heart.

"Thank God for small mercies," he whispered.

"You pay the beast his due," Jean-François mused.

"Or he takes his due from you."

It was the Liathe who'd spoken. Looking to Celene, Jean-François recalled it was her father who'd taught Gabriel those words—old drunken child-beater Raphael Castia. The historian was reminded that despite all the knives in the back, these two had grown up together. But their hatred clearly burned with an intensity that blinded them both.

The cup was broken. The Grail was gone.

The pipe hung slack in Gabriel's fingers. Smoke drifting from his lips.

"What time is it?"

"Long past the hour this tale should have finished," Jean-François replied.

Gabriel leaned forward, elbows to knees as he took another drag from his pipe. The smoke spilled from his nostrils, between his fangs, whisper stained red.

"We're almost there now, coldblood."

The historian raised his brow.

"Patience?"

Gabriel sighed.

"Patience."

II

A THOUSAND TONS OF TRUTH

“*JOIN ME, OF course.*

“Those were the words ringing in my head as I accepted Voss’s invitation,” Gabriel declared. “Gut twisted in knots as I stepped over the threshold and into Château San Maximille. The stink of blood and battle hung in the air, the bodies of slaughtered soldiers—brave boys in León colors—cooling on the stones behind me. Thousands of them, poured out like water on the frozen ground. My command.

“*My* plan.

“The last two years had been spent hunting the monster at my back. Not a night went by I didn’t relive the moment he took my everything away. There wasn’t an angel’s chance in hell I’d *ever* stand beside him, but the memory of Patience in my arms burned bright, and the thought I could have her back once I’d played out this charade eclipsed all.

“I’d listen to whatever this bastard had to say.

“And then I’d spit my refusal and take my daughter back.

“My brothers, my cousin—they were even more skeptical than I. It speaks to the depth of their love that they followed me into that keep at all. But follow they did; Lachlan first, dragging himself off the icy stone beneath Kestrel’s gaze and limping up the bloodstained stairs. Charlotte might never have joined me save for the look Lachie threw her; heart on his sleeve and plea in his eyes. And with a glance to Ettiene—looming just an arm’s length from her throat—and an order for her lieutenants to tend the wounded, she climbed down from those bloody battlements and stalked to Lachlan’s side.

“‘I pray God and Mothermaid you know what you’re doing,’ she hissed.

“‘So do I, Charli.’

“My old ’prentice looked at the château and made the sign of the wheel.

“‘So do I.’

“Baptiste followed slower, walking across the gore-slicked stone and, despite the shadow and ire that yet loomed between them, enfolding his beloved in silent embrace. Aaron was still in pieces after his clash with Kestrel—arm taken off at the shoulder, guts cleaved open, drenched in red. But he still squeezed Baptiste with his good arm, brow pressed to his husband’s as he whispered.

“‘You swore you’d stay behind the line.’

“‘I lied. I do that sometimes. Like when I told you your cookery wasn’t pure arse.’

“‘This is no jest; you might’ve died.’

“Baptiste met Aaron’s eyes then. ‘I’m mortal, Aaron. That’s what we *do*.’

“Aaron closed his eyes, kissed his husband’s brow. Baptiste hung his head, darkness and hunger and sin weighing heavy between them. But still he took his husband’s hand. And side by side, they followed Lachie and Charlotte up the château steps.

“Voss waited at the top of them, clad in white velvet and silk. His head was inclined, one hand gesturing within—the perfect picture of a genteel host inviting old friends in for dinner. The air was *freezing,* my breath roiling white as I followed a pretty redheaded lass in Voss livery down a grand stone corridor. The château was finely decorated, poorly lit, but I could still see the scars of battle from where Voss had seized it. The faint perfume of murder lingered in every shadow. My pace was wary, sword anointed with Dior’s blood still wrapped in one fist, my every instinct *screaming*.

“I was *surrounded* by vampires—that court of finely frocked highbloods, drifting through the dark about me. They were Ironhearts all, Fabién’s brood, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and more. They followed me with hungry eyes, smiled with rubied lips; a flock of killers in crushed velvet and rippling satin. I noted a woman among them, tall and curved, a bejeweled wreath of golden hair about her brow, a gown of crimson hugging her body. In one arm, she nursed a dog more kin to rat than hound, and upon her breast was embroidered the Wolves of Blood Chastain.”

“My niece Nicolette,” Jean-François murmured. “Hard at work, as always.”

“She met my eyes, gaze drifting to the blade in my hands. Dark beauties these all were, wrought of porcelain and shadow, and not many looked like warriors. Still, they were vampires. A château *full* of them. And the only thing keeping them from our throats was the monster who’d murdered the people I loved most in all the world.

“We were led to a grand dining room in the château’s heart. A great hearth encompassed one wall, a portrait of the Mothermaid and infant Redeemer above. High-backed chairs sat about a long table, and I saw fresh bloodstains on the polished oak. Imagining the feasts that had taken place here, my jaw clenched as I wondered if my Patience had been among the diners. The room was so cold it hurt just to breathe, and the shadows seemed living things. It felt surreal to sit myself at that table, watching Lachie and Charlotte and Baptiste and Aaron do the same. The heart of the enemy’s keep was no place to break ranks, but I could see every one of them desperately wanted to—to take hold of my collar and roar into my face and ask me what the *fuck* I was thinking.

“What the fuck *was* I thinking?

“That the daughter I loved more than life could be mine again. That Voss could’ve slain my brothers and friends if he’d wanted to, and yet, he’d sought parley instead. But truth told, I was thinking most of Mama’s journal. My father’s words as he abandoned her. The fact daysdeath hadn’t fallen in the nights Wulfric knew her.

“So what blackened veil had he been talking about?

“*‘What veil indeed.’*

“The question echoed about my skull, and I was unsure if it had been spoken aloud or simply in my mind. But I threw up my walls instinctively, closing myself off as best I could.

“The last place in the world I needed this bastard was in my head.

“He stood at the doors now, wreathed in unlight and bitterest chill, his shadow falling over every heart in that room. A youth, fey and bloodless, bleached by eternity’s kiss and a millennium of sin. Charlotte signed the wheel, a whispered prayer at her lips. Aaron shifted closer to Baptiste, the blackthumb half rising, his pulse unmoored. Lachlan only glowered, bloody hands curled into fists. He’d hauled his greatcoat back on for the sake of the freezing cold, but his chest and hands were yet bare, aegis burning with a brightness I’d seldom seen. This was the great enemy. The creature every silversaint was raised to hate, surpassing even dread Tolyev in the brutality of his conquests.

“The Forever King.

“*‘Might I offer refreshment? ’*

“Voss looked about the room, eyebrow arched ever so slight. My friends made not a sound, the air brittle with chill and fear, the perfume of blood digging claws into my aching belly. I swallowed, tongue thick with the leavings of battle.

“‘I could use a drink.’

“I put my boots up on his table and met that bastard’s eyes.

“‘Something sweet to wash down your children’s ashes. Laure. Danton. Alba. Aléne.’ I counted off on my fingers, name by name. ‘Killing princes is thirsty work.’

“Charlotte looked at me in horror, Baptiste’s face ran bloodless, even Aaron threw me a warning glance. But despite the glint of rage in those midnight eyes, Fabién’s lips curled in the gentlest of smiles. The lass who’d escorted us to the hall had started a fire in the hearth, flames licking feebly at dusty timbers. But with a glance from Voss, the thrall slipped from the room, closing the great doors behind her. In the silence following, Fabién walked to the slowly waking blaze. The vampire moved like a statue come to life, no motion unconsidered, no gesture wasted. Forever in flesh.

“He stared into the fire as if fascinated. Pinpricks of light flickered on the black orbs of his eyes, the marble of his skin blushed by those rising flames. The very darkness seemed to warp and twist away from him, the horror of his presence crawling on my skin.

“*‘Why, think ye, we suppose hell shall be flame? ’*

“No one replied, glances shared across that bloodstained table.

“*‘Flame be the giver of life. The bringer of warmth. The hearth of the home. Why then doth mortal man imagine an eternity of fire for the wicked? Why not … nothingness? An eternity of sensation, even torturous, must surely be preferable to a forever of ennui? ’*

“‘I’m not in the mood for philosophy, bastard. Speak your piece and be done.’

“*‘Oh, Gabriel. Never change, I beg thee.*’

“Fabién met my eyes, the same smile I’d seen as he entered my home that dreadful night curling his lips once more. It wasn’t scorn I saw. Not mockery. God, it was … affection. He was *enjoying* this, I realized. No matter I’d murdered his children, no matter the blood of thousands had just been spilled outside, no matter I’d come within a heartbeat of ending his forever. And the truth of Fabién Voss dawned on me then. A thousand tons of it. I saw this thing for what he was. He’d told me himself.

“*Centuries have I sought an adversary worthy of me. A man who could give me but a moment in which I could again taste life through fear.*

“Fabién Voss was *bored.*

“This was a creature who’d lived a thousand years. Every sensation explored. Every whim indulged. I realized all this—the war, the suffering, the pain—all of it in the end was a simple … amusement for him. For someone who’d been everywhere, done *every*thing, to feel some new sensation—the murder of a child, the thrill of near defeat, the threat of death—was as close to living as he could come. That was why, awful as it was to consider, *why* this monster who both feared and loathed me was still genuinely fond of me.

“Terror.

“Hatred.

“Rage.

"I made him *feel.*

"'*Ye know me true, old friend.*'

"'I'm not your friend,' I hissed. 'I'm your *end*. Now spit whatever bullshit you have stuck between your teeth, so I can get my daughter and be gone.'

"'*Our daughter.*'

"'Sonofab—'

"I was halfway out of my seat when the doors opened, and Kestrel and Ettiene stepped inside. The Princes yet wore their platemail, dark metal sticky red with the leavings of countless slain. Aaron and Lachie both rankled at the sight of the monster who'd bested them, but Kestrel stared only at me. My handprints were yet scorched on Ettiene's flesh, the threat of sudden violence hanging in the air. But stood by the hearth, Fabién only glanced to his eldest, speaking without speech. And in the chill-brittle silence following, a passel of servants in Voss livery stepped into the room.

"Pretty messieurs and demoiselles all, they carried trays laden with fare from cellar and larder—dusty bottles of red and mounds of potatoloaf and a steaming pot of what smelled like rabbit stew. They set the table as if for a feast among friends, golden plates and crystal goblets. Despite the trials of the day and the rumble of long-empty bellies, not a one of my company reached for the food. But sinking into my seat with jaw clenched, I snatched up a fabulously expensive bottle of Vin de Montfort, knocked the top off on the table's edge, and splashed myself a gobletful.

"With a sidelong glance, Lachlan nudged another goblet toward me, and I filled it to the brim. A storm was rising outside, faint thunder ringing on the stone around us, distant lightning licking the sky. The Maiden and the Crow stared yet at their father, shadows swaying and flames dancing and breath roiling white from between my fangs. But while his children bristled with hostility, the Forever King seemed perfectly serene.

"And once the servants were done, they and the Princes departed without a word.

"'*Eat. Drink.*' Voss gazed about the hall, swallowing fear like wine. '*No snare do I lay for thee, no dirge do I play for thee. In peace thou hast entered, and in peace ye may depart.*'

"'Get the fuck *on* with it, wanker.'

"This from Lachlan, spat not spoken. Of all in the room, Lachie had spent the most time in the presence of ancien highbloods. His father was one of the Five, remember, just like Fabién. And while even Aaron seemed a little subdued in the presence of the Forever King, my old 'prentice looked fearless, aegis burning brighter than the hearthfire.

"'*Á Craeg,*' Voss mused, looking him over. '*Intriguing, thy choice of moniker. Pray, why name thyself not for thy dread father, Dyvok, but for the slave he raped?* '

"'If yer lookin' to get a rise, leech, prettier bitches than ye have tried and failed.' Aaron smiled as Lachlan looked Voss up and down. 'An' I'm nae here to dance fer yer fuckin' jollies. I'm here fer my brother. So dribble yer shite, so we can be on our way.'

"'*Thy brother.*'

"'Tha's right.'

"'*I tell thee truly, boy, this night, afore the cock crows, thee and thy beloved shalt forsake thy brother dear.*'

"'Never.'

"'*Never be a long time in the coming, Lachlan Dyvok.*'

"The pair matched wills, the air crackling, Lachie's aegis burning on the arc of Fabién's eyes. Voss was ancient. Puissant. But no matter his age nor power, Fabién was still bound by the same laws and frailties as all kith, and in the end, it was *he* who turned slowly back toward the flames. Charlotte beamed to see that even in shadow this deep, God's light held sway. But secretly, I wondered if Fabién had been forced to turn, or if he were showing Lachlan his back to prove how unafeared he truly was.

"'*Thou hast the right of it, boy,*' he declared. '*At purpose are we here. Promised thee a truth, hath I. The truth of that plague we did name Esani.*'

"My pulse quickened in the freezing air. I knew I could trust nothing he said, but a part of me still burned to hear what he had to say. My father had been one of the Faithless—in some way, their story was also mine. My sister's too. But more, it was the story of the girl I'd sworn to protect. My dear, brave Dior.

"'*Didst thy father ever speak of it, Lachlan Dyvok?* ' Voss gazed up at that portrait of the Mothermaid, the infant in her arms. '*The night we returned to the scene of our great crime? Our battle at the site of thy Redeemer's murder, 'gainst our sister and her murd'rous brood? Spake dread Tolyev ever, of the Charbourg's fall?* '

"'Nae to me.'

"'*Nor why we sought to erase Illia and her acolytes from this earth?* '

"'Nae.' Lachlan took a gulp of wine, dragging glowing knuckles across his lips. 'But that tale should be plain enough to guess. The Esani murdered hundreds of yer kind in their Red Crusade. I wager there was nary a leech under heaven back then who hadn't lost a maker, a lover, a bairn to their faith.' My old 'prentice glanced to me, green eyes shining. 'Revenge is a perilous and powerful sort of drug.'

"'*Not a* faith *were they.*'

"The words hung in the air, edged with contempt. I saw the gleam of Voss's fangs as he gazed into the flames, hissing soft and venomous.

"'*Not a faith, but a madness. The tally of their murders was uncounted, aye, their lust for the blood of their own kind unmeasured. But t'was not for mere vengeance we gathered to destroy them. We marched on Charbourg's walls to end the Esani's insanity afore it ended us. All of us.*'

"One pale hand rose, sweeping the gathering, the keep, the empire beyond.

"'*All of this.*'

"Aaron lifted his eyes then. My brother had been mute up to this point, but I knew there was more to his silence than the pain of his wounds. I think Aaron wanted to remain small here. Unnoticed. It was as if he feared being in the presence of monsters might remind us that *he* was a monster in kind. That with one small push in the wrong direction, he could so very easily become like them.

"'What do you mean *all of this*?' he demanded.

"'*What think ye I mean, Aaron Dyvok?* '

"'My name is de Coste.'

"The Forever King smiled. And as that black gaze fell on my brother, I saw him shiver. I wondered if they spoke then, in the halls of Aaron's mind.

"What Voss might have seen there.

"What he might have promised.

"'*And so we come to crux.*' Voss turned on me once more. '*Truth. The reason why, much as ye despise me, old friend, thou shalt this very night swear allegiance unto my banner. For though drenched in the blood of babes and nations both I be, the evil I am be* nothing *compared to the evil coiled behind Augustin's walls. An evil which e'en now presses thy dear Dior to part this blackened veil and attain all that waits beyond.*'

"'The veil they speak of,' I said. 'It's not daysdeath.'

"'*That great work, undone by hands so feeble and few?* ' Voss scoffed. '*Hardly.*'

"'What is it then? The blackened veil? If not daysdeath, *what*?'

"'*Life.*'

"Voss looked down at his hand, voice filled with a sorrow near boundless.

"'*This miserable, lonely, desperate eternal life.*'

"'Enough bullshit. What do the Esani want, Voss?'

"'*The world, old friend. They want to end this* world.'

"'I don't—'

"'*All Shall Kneel. Deeds Not Words. Sharper Than Blades. The Wolf Frets Not. These the words of our noble lines, and in each, there be the desire of each Priori for their progeny. The heart of all they are. What then, be the words of Esani? What creed did Illia choose, that should define her line entire?* '

"'Judgment Comes,' Baptiste murmured.

"'*Judgment Comes.*' Voss nodded. 'That *is what they seek, Baptiste, son of Ismael. The Day of Judgment promised in Testaments, when God above shall reach to earth below and take up all flesh in rapture to be weighed afore his throne. And should rule of earth and hea'en be united, that Day* shall *come to pass. That glorious, apocalyptic day they hath labored to birth, since first Illia threw her lot in with Esan's children, and fought to raise the Redeemer's line to* *empire's throne. The Day* all *shall be judged.*'

"'A loophole,' I breathed.

"I looked about the room, heart pounding in my chest as realization sank home.

"'The Esani faith. Illia's crusade, communion, all of it.'

"I looked to Voss, horrified.

"'It's just a fucking *loophole*.'

"Charlotte blinked, shaking her head. 'What d—'

"'When a vampire dies, their souls are cast into hell. No heavenly appraisal, no weighing of goodness nor sin. Only damnation awaits the damned after death.' I met Lachie's eyes, pulse racing. 'But if a vampire could survive until the Day of Judging…'

"'They'd be taken up with the rest of the flesh,' Lachlan whispered.

"'Exactly. They could dodge the hellfire awaiting every coldblood after death, and plead their worthiness before Heaven's King direct. And if they'd lived according to scripture, if they'd been shrived of sin through contrition before their judging…'

"'They might be granted salvation,' Aaron breathed.

"Baptiste met his husband's eyes then, his own stung with tears.

"'Salvation.'

"'But at the cost of this world.' Charlotte gazed about the room, her face bloodless. 'Every man. Every woman. Every child. It would be the end of everything.'

"*'Everything.'*

"Voss met each stare, peering into every soul.

"*'Name me evil incarnate. Drenched in blood innocent. Father of a hundred thousand orphans, lover to a million widowers weeping, aye, all true.* All *true. Yet not e'en Forever's King hath desire to slay every living thing on the face of this cold earth.*'

"'You fear the fire.'

"I looked to that hearth he stood beside, the hungry flames licking at the air.

"'You sold your soul to hell's tyrant. You and all who slew the Redeemer. When *you* end, you burn, Judgment Day or no. So as lonely and desperate as your life becomes…'

"*''Tis preferable to the alternative.*'

"Fabién's smile reached all the way to his eyes.

"*'As I say, old friend. Ye know me true.*'

"'I know all you are is lies. You want Dior out of Maryn's clutches and in your fucking own, don't think I don't see it. Your every waking moment since you learned she lived has been spent trying to claim that girl. Why?'

"*'She be mine.*'

"'The fuck does that even mean? She's nobody's but her own.'

“‘*As I told thee when ye held our sweet Patience in thine arms: There be no greater gift than love of family, Gabriel. And Dior Lachance be mine. My* true *family. Thought lost these long and frozen years. Last remnant of my mortal mother’s line.*’

“He glanced to the portrait above the crackling hearth.

“‘*My dear Mothermaid.*’

“I frowned, trying to wrangle his meaning.

“‘Your brother.’ Face drawn with horror, Baptiste looked up at the infant in that Maid’s arms. ‘God Almighty … he was your brother.’

“‘*Half. My mortal father’s peerage not so great as his. Nor my mortal prospects. No son of God, poor Fabién. No Redeemer made flesh, no mighty leader of men. Yet my great and noble brother died in agony. Broken on the wheel* I *forged him. And Fabién endures still.*’

“Voss smiled at the painting, no light left in his eyes.

“‘*Who be mightier now?* ’

“Silence hung in the room so thick, I could hear the heartbeats of the thralls outside. My belly was a churning puddle of ice and wine and bile, my eyes meeting Lachie’s, Aaron’s, all of us bewildered. Every one of us was gripped with the brutality and enormity of this. A tale a *thousand* years in the making, and us, caught in the storm of it. But in that ringing quiet, Charlotte spoke the most important question of all.

“‘How can we believe you?’

“Voss turned, drowning my cousin in his gaze. Charlotte met that black stare, and though she trembled, clutching the wheel about her throat, her faith held true.

“‘How can we believe a single word from your godless mouth?’

“‘*Each of thee could I have slain, were it my wish. Three nights hence, my legion endless marches for Augustin, with or without thee. No prevarication hath I made as to my ambition.* All *shall kneel. What reason hath I to lie, Charlotte de León?* ’

“‘Because you *want* something from us.’

“Fabién tilted his head.

“‘*Thy numbers added to mine own would be welcome, I confess. The walls of Augustin be strong. And old. But preventing world’s end be a goal I would imagine all in this room hath stake in, Lionne Cendrée. Thee and thy fresh-plucked beau more than most.*’

“Charlotte blinked. ‘What—’

“‘*Faint the spark. The merest promise of a life, but aready thy bloodscent bears trace of brightest joy to come.*’ Voss glanced to Lachlan. ‘*My compliments, archer. Thy first trip to the range, and thine arrow struck true.*’

“Charlotte was pale, one hand drifting to her belly. ‘No.’

“Lachlan touched her leg, whispering. ‘Charli…’

“‘*No,* I…’

"My jaw clenched tight. My fists tighter. Every word Voss had spoken might well be deceit. This bastard had slain my bride. Murdered my baby. But beyond suspicion, beyond hatred, beyond the thought of that little girl upstairs waiting for me to sing her to sleep, one thought pierced all others. I could see it in Aaron's eyes, hung now in the chill between us. Whispered among those crackling flames.

"*What if he spoke truth?*

"Voss had no way of knowing my suspicions about the Faithless before today—I'd have felt him rummaging through those thoughts. But these pieces fit too neat. The prophecy we'd found in Dún Maergenn was no key to ending daysdeath, I knew that already. And though Dior was no dolt, she *was* surrounded with liars. My sister. Phoebe. God knows what poison Maryn had been spilling into her ears.

"I cursed myself a fool again for leaving her. For not believing in her. Staring down at the silver on my skin, yet unlit, even in the presence of evil as complete as Voss.

"I'd failed her.

"I'd *left* her.

"I'd promised never to do that.

"'We need to speak on all this,' I declared. 'Alone.'

"'*Take the day. The morrow, also. No harm shall befall thee here. Three nights hence, we depart for Augustin. Should ye choose not to march 'neath my banner, thee and thy army may flee back to León. Should I prevent the Faithless and their catspaws from ending this world at Maidsfeast, our next meeting shall be not so cordial. Yet on craven's wings though it be, I shall harry not thy flight.*' Voss turned to me, smiling. '*But afore thy counsel begins in earnest … thou hast made vow to a sweet young lady of our acquaintance, aye?* '

"I bristled, jaw clenched tight. Voss only smiled wider.

"'*Best not disappoint another.*'

"I took a long gulp of wine, rising to my feet and looking to my friends.

"'I'll return swift. Hold fast 'til I get back.'

"'Walk safe in the light, brother,' Lachlan warned.

"'You too. And … congratulations, Lachie. I'm happy for you. Both of you.'

"Charlotte met my gaze, hand yet to her belly. I gave Baptiste a wink, shot a warning glance to Aaron, who nodded understanding. Though I'd not even sensed him moving, the Forever King stood now at the door, and the door itself was opened wide. That young thrall lass in Voss livery waited outside, head bowed as Voss spoke.

"'*Antoinette shall spirit thee to our princess's arms.*'

"I saw fangs glinting at the edge of his smile.

"'*Give her a kiss from Papa Fabién.*'

"God, it took all I had in me not to lunge for him then. I could see the slice through his frockcoat where I'd almost split his heart, my handprint on his throat. I'd come *far* closer to ending him than he'd have liked to admit, and I fancied I saw fear behind that smile. But turning, Fabién drifted down the corridor, smooth as ice, leaving me in shadow.

"Vampires lingered in that gloom, watching with red-rimmed eyes. Faint thunder echoed overhead, the flagstones beneath me trembling. But with a murmur for me to follow, the thrall began climbing a broad stair to the levels above.

"And sighing, I went to kiss my daughter goodnight."

III

PATIENCE

“*MY DAUGHTER*.

“Sweet Mothermaid, that thought had me reeling, head spinning, belly churning as I climbed those cold stone stairs. The lass I followed moved swift as any thrall, but my own legs were having trouble keeping me upright. My body was at the crumbling edge of its limits now. And beyond the exhaustion of battle, the thirst in my veins, the weight of all Voss had just told me, one word gripped me like a vise.

“*Patience*.

“What would I say to her? What would I *be* to her? Hadn’t the Almighty tortured me enough? I’d thought her gone forever, a piece of me with her, yet as I climbed higher, the thrill of learning she yet lived was fading, and I was left with the awful truth she didn’t *live* at all. No matter what awaited me in that room upstairs, Patience was dead.

“My baby was Dead.

“‘Chevalier.’

“The whisper came from the shadows. We’d reached the second floor, lined with ironclad doors and dead torches in cold sconces. It was testament to how deep I was mired in troubled thoughts that I’d not seen her, stepping now from the gloom in that beautiful blood-red gown. The same vampire I’d seen lurking among Voss’s court below.

“The corset drew her body into a perfect hourglass, her curves testing the very limits of the fabric, skin pale and smooth as freshest cream. Her long blond hair was styled like a crown about her brow, that small puff of fluff some might've called a dog pressed against her cleavage. She held me pinned with her eyes, smile red as cherries.

"'Forgive me for startling you.'

"I looked this dark beauty over, heart thumping. 'Who are you?'

"'Nicolette Chastain.' She dipped into a deep curtsey, obviously intended to treat me to the view down her bodice. 'Ambassador of Margot Chastain of the Blood Chastain, First and Last of her Name, Priori of Shepherds and Undying Empress of Wolves and Men.'

"'And what can I do for you, Ambassador?'

"The vampire glowered at the lass escorting me, and with a bow, the thrall retreated out of earshot. As she placed her small dog on the ground, Nicolette's eyes returned to mine, smoldering like forgefire.

"'More what we might do for each other, Chevalier. I know you are a *terribly* busy man, but when your other business is concluded, I would speak with you. Alone.'

"'Indeed.'

"She drifted closer, placing one cool hand on my arm. 'In*deed.*'

"'I think I might seek out a bath first, mademoiselle.'

"Her eyes roamed bloody brow to bloody boots, breathing in the perfume of gore on my skin. 'Oh, please don't go to any trouble on my account.'

"I glanced at the wolves and moons embroidered on her bodice, gaze tumbling down the valley beyond. 'What the hell is one of Margot's brood doing among the Voss?'

"'Grandmama is calling a Conclave. I am here to convince Lord Fabién to attend.' She leaned close, breath tickling my throat as she lowered her voice. 'Between you and me, I'm not sure she *wants* him there, but it'd be impolite not to ask.'

"'*Grandmama?* ' I scoffed. '*That's* what you call her? Margot Chastain is one of the oldest vampires in the realm, responsible for more carnage than every plague, flood, and famine in the history of this empire. I don—'"

"*Merci!*"

The Last Silversaint glanced up as Jean-François's cry echoed on the walls.

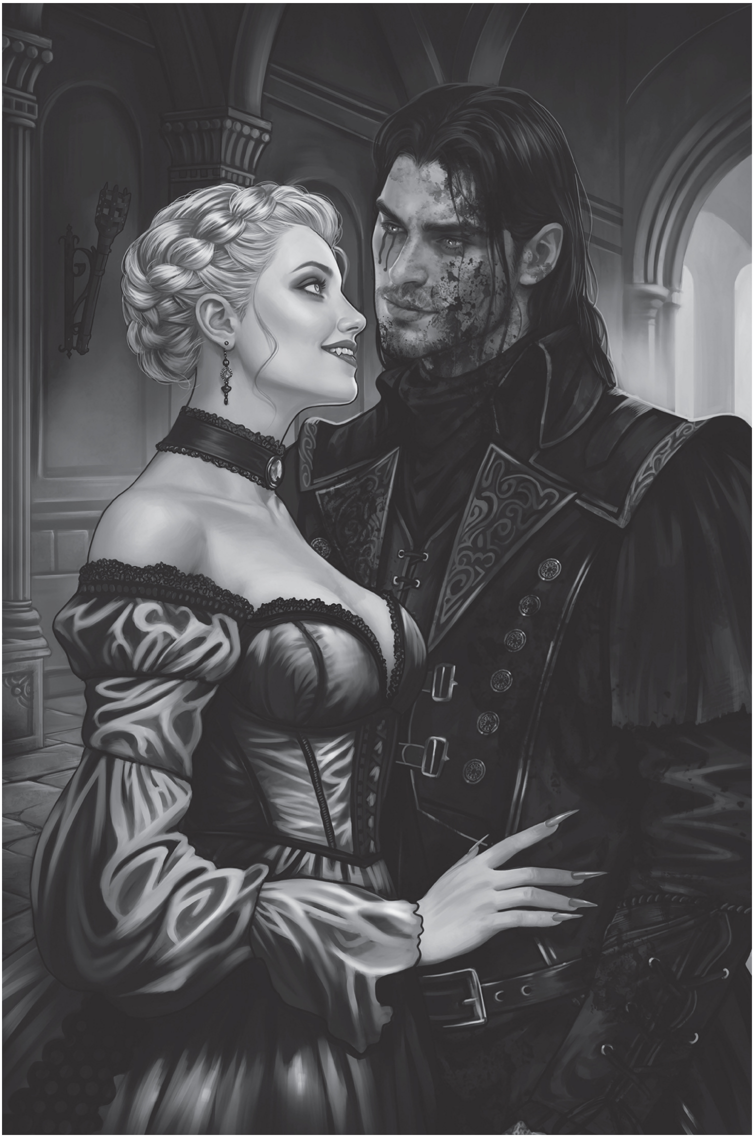
"*Véris,* Chevalier! That is *exactly* what I've been saying! I mean *Grandmama,* honestly, as if the Undying Empress of Wolves and Men were some—"

The historian faltered, and he glanced back and forth between the siblings. Gabriel simply stared, blood congealing on his skin. Celene blinked once, her brow darkening. Calmed now, Jean-François straightened his cravat, cleared his throat.

"Apologies. Proceed."

Gabriel raised one brow, staring at the historian a long moment before continuing.

“Nicolette only smiled at my tirade. Gazing up into my eyes, standing close enough that her whole body was in contact with mine, her hand slipping up my arm.



“‘I’ve heard rumor around court,’ she purred. ‘Your name, mentioned along with something about a cup of holy blood. I am certain my Empress w—’

“‘I’m certain she would.’

“Sick of this little game, I pulled my arm loose.

“‘Your timing couldn’t be worse, vampire. But even were it impeccable, Margot Chastain can still suck the snot-end of my prick. And *you* can just fuck off.’

“‘Well, couldn’t you just charm the paint right off the walls? I wonder what else you might charm off, given opportunity?’

“‘I have a promise to keep, leech. With company far more pleasant than yours. You lay hand on me again, I’ll take it off at the neck. Now get the *hell* out of my way.’

“Smile completely undimmed, Nicolette loosed her grip, drifting back into the shadows. Aiming a final glower in her direction, I rejoined the thrall waiting at corridor’s end. My heart was pounding like a war drum by the time we reached the third tier, escorted past rows of thrallswords to a heavy door, clad in iron bands. The letter *P* was carved into the metal by ancient claws.

“My daughter’s room.

“A vampire stood at corridor’s end; the same who’d wrapped her pale arms around my baby at battle’s end. Even if she’d not put her hands on my Patience, I’d have known her anywhere; the sight of her stood with her siblings outside my door as Fabién came knocking forever burned into my mind’s eye. Marble skin and red talons and crimson gown, bare shoulders kissed by chocolat curls and a stole of grey fox fur. She regarded me silently, eyes and soul as black as her bastard father’s. The Fifth Prince of Forever.

“‘Morgane.’

“*‘Chevalier.’* She nodded. ‘*Well fought today.’*

“‘I almost killed your father today, vampire.’

“*‘My father died over three hundred years ago. Murdered along with my husband. My mother. My sisters. My daughters. By he who then cursed me with forever.’*

“She smiled, and in her eyes I saw the hatred of poison centuries.

“*‘So as I say. Well fought.’*

“Morgane lowered that black gaze, glancing now to the door.

“*‘Within thy daughter abides. Thy precious flower bloomed. She hath been well tended, these last nights, I vow it. Know I would not have allowed harm to befall her.’*

“I stared, one hand still holding my bloody sword.

“‘Merci, madame. As payment for your kindness, I vow to kill you quick.’

“Morgane’s eyes narrowed.

“And opening my daughter’s door, I stepped inside.

“Noon had struck, stormlight pressed upon the windows, thunder rocking the walls. But the curtains were drawn, the room near pitch-black. It took a breath for even paleblood eyes to adjust, but I began to make out the outlines of a palatial boudoir. A tall wardrobe. A grand four-poster bed. I saw a desk against the wall nearby, parchment scattered across polished oak. My daughter had *loved* to draw—an artiste just like her sweet mama—and I saw these were sketches wrought by her hand. They were childish but showed promise, my eyes stinging as I leafed through them.

“A rabbit, crouched in snow.

“A tree, stood tall against frail sunset.

“A dead boy, sprawled on bloody stone.

“My heart froze, rising into my throat as I roamed deeper among her drawings. Mutilated soldiers. Charred skeletons. Horrors I’ll give no breath to here. The inhumanity of it left me reeling, so sick I had to lean against the desk for fear of falling. And as the timbers creaked beneath my weight, I heard her voice in the dark.

“‘Papa?’

“She stirred behind me, sitting up now in her bed. I turned toward her, chest heaving, dread and panic and awful crushing guilt washing me through. But looking on her then, wide iron-grey eyes and long midnight locks and skin white as yesteryear snows, I didn’t see the monster who’d made those drawings. I didn’t see a Prince of Forever.

“I saw my angel.

“My beauty.

“My …

“‘Patience.’

“‘You came,’ she whispered.

“‘I did.’

“She reached out for me. ‘Will you sing for me, Papa?’

“All the love in the world was shining in her eyes. She was the end of the longest road of my life. And it mattered not then, what she might’ve done. It mattered not what she’d become. All that mattered was her smile.”

The Last Silversaint shook his head, voice cracking.

“My Astrid had a *thousand* smiles. A smile cruel as winter wind that could cut you down to shivering bone. A smile light as dove’s down, just the hint of it across her cheek to let you know she was listening as you spoke. A smile that could make you fear, and a smile that could make you cry, and a smile that made you feel like you were the only man alive. But my favorite, my *very* favorite, was the same my daughter gave me that day. Inherited from her beautiful mama. A smile that whispered and made me smile in kind.”

Gabriel hung his head, staring at the name on his fingers.

“What did it whisper?”

It was Celene speaking, gazing across the water with bloody tears rimming her eyes.

“That she was happy,” Jean-François sighed. “And the sight of him had made her so.”

The cell beneath Sul Adair was deathly quiet now. Even the rushing river had seemed to still. The men who had beaten him so brutally but a few minutes before now stared at the Last Silversaint with unveiled pity, and more than one pawed at their eyes. Dario was sniffling, gaze downturned, and with a groan of “Gods*sakes*” the Marquis handed over a silk kerchief. But the historian paused then, staring down at the pages of his tome, thumbing the bloody teardrop that had just fallen onto the page.

“I’ll not speak of it.”

Gabriel cleared his throat, growling the lump away.

“What we said to each other in that dark. What I felt to have her back in my arms after all that time. I don’t give a *damn* if Margot demands the whole of my tale. I don’t care if she tortures me to death.” He lifted his tear-stung gaze, fixed on Jean-François. “I’ll not give your mistress *that,* vampire. That moment is mine and mine alone.”

Jean-François nodded, dabbing at his lashes.

“Did you sing her to sleep?”

“… I promised I would.”

“What did you sing, Gabriel?”

The silence deepened, the dark so large, the historian felt it on his skin. His gaze was fixed on the wretch opposite him; head hung low, torn face crusted with blood. Despite it all, Jean-François still felt pity for Gabriel de León. In all his decades, the historian could not recall meeting a man who had suffered quite so much. Again he wondered why the ’saint had not simply ended it. If there was truth in the Forever King’s words; that an eternity of sensation, no matter how painful, was preferable to nothing at all.

Gabriel lifted his head, eye shining with tears. And the Last Silversaint began singing. The historian knew the words, whispering now in tune—the nursery rhyme Gabriel would sing to his daughter, back when she was woken by terrors in the night.

“*Sleep now, my lovely, sleep now, my dear,*
“*Dark dreams will fade now your papa is near.*
“*Fear not the monsters, fear not the night,*
“*Papa is here now and all shall be right.*
“*Close your eyes, darling, and know this be true,*
“*Morning will come, and your papa loves you.*”

IV

UNFORGIVEN

"'THIS IS FUCKIN' *madness*!'

"Such was the hiss, venomous and faint as I trudged down toward the dining room. My Patience was at last asleep, tears dried on my cheeks and the memory of her smile warming the halls of my yet-broken heart. I felt almost as if I was drunk; lightheaded, half-witted, feet numbed as I descended. The shadows of Château San Maximille still beckoned, but with noon long since struck and the battle done, most of Voss's court had retired for the day. Hulking thrallswords stood watch, servants scuttled icy halls, and I could smell grave pyres burning in the city outside. But the keep was hushed now—enough to hear that furious whisper from the dining hall well before I reached the doors.

"'I love Gabriel de León like a brother. There's none in this room who's waded through more blood and misery with that man than I. And *I* say—'

"'Careful, Lachie. The walls in here have keenest ears.'

"My brother turned as I opened the doors. His cheeks were pinked and he was on his feet, facing Aaron across that bloodstained table. But he fell silent as I stepped over the threshold, closed those tall doors once more at my back.

"That keep was *freezing*—unnatural, even with the snowstorm outside. But the fire still burned in the hearth, snapping and cracking, and snatching up another bottle of Vin de Montfort, I stood beside it, stomping my feet against that unholy cold.

"'What news of our men, cousin?'

"I glanced over my shoulder at Charlotte. She'd recovered the color in her face, but I could see she was still slightly off-kilter after Voss's revelation. She met my eyes, gaze flitting quickly to my neck, presumably checking for bite marks.

"I couldn't blame her a drop.

"'Mathieu is liaising with one of Voss's capitaines,' she reported. 'A section of old town has been set aside for us to shelter in. I'm loath to bring the refugees inside these walls, but they're better off in houses than tents in this wretched weather.'

"'The storm will break soon.'

"'And then?'

"It was Baptiste speaking, heart in his throat, dark eyes on mine.

"'What then, Gabe?'

"I turned back to the hearth, staring into those flames. The strength of Phoebe's blood was fading now, any chance I had of standing against Fabién fading with it. But in its lack, I could feel that awful thirst rising once more. Just the beginnings, burning faint, but sure to swiftly rise. That need never sated. That hole never filled.

"I lifted my wine, gulping from the bottle's neck.

"'What then indeed, brother.'

"'You've nae thoughts on the matter?' Lachlan demanded.

"'Sounds like you've a few to get off your chest?'

"'Oh, one or two. But let's start with what the hell are we still doin' here?'

"'Where *should* we be, Lachie?'

"'Any place but under the wing of the *Forever fuckin' King,* Gabriel!'

"'*Any* place isn't an option,' I snapped. 'We've precisely two by my measure. March with Voss to Augustin, or march the fuck back to León. Any other road puts us into conflict with the Endless Legion. And after today, that's a war we can't win.'

"'Then we *lose* it,' Lachlan snarled. 'But at least we go down fighting. And we weaken Voss enough that he breaks on the capital's walls.'

"'What about the refugees? The campfolk who traveled with us? There's more than just our lives at stake here, Lachlan.' My eyes drifted to Charlotte's belly. 'More than ever.'

"'Don't do that,' Lachlan spat. 'Don't *use* that. I know what yer daughter means to ye, Gabe. I know how dear Dior is to ye, too. But the Forever King is naught but lies, brother. Law the Second, aye? *Dead tongues heeded are Dead tongues tasted.*'

"'You don't need to lecture me on the laws of San Michon. I'm the one who taught them to you.'

"'I remember. Just as I remember what happens when Gabriel de León allows himself to be led by his heart and not his head.'

"'And you, cousin?' I demanded, looking back to Charlotte. 'Are you willing to sacrifice those innocents we rescued from Voss's teeth? Our washerwomen and runningboys and stockmen thrown to the flames too? What says La Lionne Cendrée?'

"Charlotte's brow darkened, the scent of smoke and ashes strung in the air.

"'Enough blood has been spilled this day. I'd not see more innocents on the pyre.' She shook her head, flame reflected in her gaze as she hissed. 'But I will be damned before I see men in León colors marching beneath that monster's flag. To spill the blood of imperial soldiers? At the behest of that … that *animal?*'

"She gritted her teeth, gaze boring into mine.

"'Never.'

"Lachlan took her hand, squeezing tight. 'Charli and I are of like mind, Gabe.'

"'A student of Gabriel de León being led about by his pistolet.' Aaron reclined in his chair, affecting his mocking Ossian accent. 'Color me every shade of shocked, wee squire.'

"'Fuck you, de Coste.'

"'To be sure, to be sure.'

"'Can ye stow the smartarsery and tell me what the hell you'd have us do?'

"'I'd have us do what very few of us seem to *be* doing, á Craeg.' Aaron smoothed one blond lock from his face with his good hand. 'I'd have us think. I'd have us ask perhaps the most important question ever uttered in the history of this empire. No, this *world.*'

"'What if he's telling the truth?' I murmured.

"Aaron nodded, meeting my eyes.

"*'What if he's telling the truth? '*

"Lachlan clenched his jaw, sinking into his seat as Aaron's gaze roamed the room.

"'If the Faithless are what Voss says, we have no choice, mes amis. No matter the price, nor what history may say. No matter if it costs all our lives. They *must* be stopped.'

"'Aaron…' It was Baptiste speaking now, gazing on his husband. 'If Voss speaks truth … if the Esani bring the Day of Judging and you're taken up, you could find—'

"'Salvation,' Aaron whispered.

"*'Salvation.'* My brother took his husband's hand, tears in his eyes. 'Fate has conspired to part us, love. Even in death we'll not be united. But if you were saved, we could live side by side in God's kingdom. We could be *together,* Aaron.'

"Aaron looked into the flames, and I could see the serpent he wrestled with. If Voss spoke true, the Esani's plan to birth Judgment Day was Aaron's one chance to see heaven. His *one* chance at peace. The alternative was a life of endless pain. The torture of watching his beloved grow old and die. The agony of wandering this earth alone until death and hellfire claimed him. The struggle in him was palpable; the desire to escape the dreadful hand that fate had dealt. But I could still hear the words he spoke in that frozen glade near Maergenn.

"'What would we be, love?' he asked Baptiste softly. 'If we conspired to end the lives of every man and woman under heaven? Every babe unborn? And what kind of God would forgive such dreadful labor, much less reward it with paradise?'

"Aaron shook his head, kissing his husband's hands.

"'No God I pray to. If that be my choice, love, I choose flame. And though it last eternity, no hellfire will warm me more than the memory of you in my arms.'

"Baptiste hung his head, tears spilling down his cheeks. Aaron kissed his eyes, one after the other, hand pressed to his husband's cheek. And then he looked to me.

"'We cannot take the chance. The Faithless *must* be stopped.'

"I nodded, thoughts and heart both racing now. 'We needn't attack the capital in force. I could … find a way inside, maybe. You know the castles of this realm better than any, Lachie, there must be some way for a single man to get beyond those battlements unseen. I steal inside, find Dior, tell her about Maryn, the veil, all of it.'

"'And then what?' Lachlan demanded. 'Yer safe inside the walls while we're stuck out here with our cocks in our hands and the Endless Legion up our arses? Even if ye somehow manage to deal with the Esani, you think Voss won't attack Augustin anyway?'

"'You were all in favor of attacking him right *now* a moment ago,' Aaron pointed out. 'Tiresome as I find you, á Craeg, at least this way you'd be alive.'

"'You suppose Voss won't turn on us the second he claims Augustin's throne?' Charlotte asked. 'It may be fine for some, M. de Coste, but we're naught but cattle to him. If we retreat, we stand a chance. If Voss attacks Augustin with the numbers he has, he might win the day, but it'll tear him bloody. Perhaps enough to defeat him for good at León.'

"'And if he fails at Augustin?' I asked. 'If Dior takes the throne and all the Esani have worked for comes to pass? That's a hell of a stake to gamble on one roll of the dice, cousin.'

"'And Voss *knows* that,' Lachie hissed, desperate and glowering. 'Ye don't live a thousand years by bein' a fool! He's given ye a choice that's nae choice at all! It's nae gamble when the dice are loaded, don't ye see yer playin' right into his hands? If ye take up arms against imperial troops, if ye march on yer own capital under his flag and spill the blood of Augustin's sons and daughters, they will never forgive ye, Gabriel. *Never.*'

"He met my eyes, pleading.

"'Nor will I.'

"'What happened to *Your back, my blade*?'

"'Nae this time.'

"I nodded, heart heavy in my chest. 'Then it seems I die unforgiven. Brother.'

"Silence slipped back into the room, cold and hard as ice. And though I racked my mind for some words to sway them, in the end I could find none. Much as it hurt to let Lachlan and my cousin go, Charlotte was Baronne, and if she chose defense of her own walls, I couldn't find much fault in it. She'd already risked everything for me and lost thousands on the wager. Even now, I could smell the corpses being burned outside.

"The pair took their leave, voices hushed, Charlotte marching out from Voss's château to find her lieutenants, Lachie beside her. Aaron and Baptiste stood yet with me, and though I was grateful beyond words for their loyalty, I wondered if I shouldn't beg them to leave too. We were still in terrible danger here. In truth, I could see no way out from this darkness. But I couldn't leave Dior alone in it. I'd left her once already.

"I'd promised never to do that.

"Preparations were made through the night. And though he might've let the blood of León flow like rivers through those streets, the Forever King kept his word. Fabién's gaze was already fixed on Augustin, troops mustering in his courtyards, foulbloods upon his walls, staring southward with hungry eyes. And though he was losing Charlotte's troops and the advantage they might've given, in the end Voss had what he wanted.

"He had *me*.

"I stood on the San Maximille bridge with Aaron and Baptiste, grey snows in our hair. The storm had broken near dawn, and not wanting to risk a change of heart from Voss, the Baronne de León had ordered the long march home. The sea of tents had been stowed, thousands of battle-wearied troops bidding adieu to war—for now, at least. As we watched banners being furled, wagons loaded, Charlotte and Lachlan marched across the snows toward us, aiming to bid us farewell.

"I was wounded by this parting. Not just from Lachie, but Charlotte too. If nothing else, Voss had spoken truth when he'd said there was no greater love than that of famille. And I'd grown to care for this fierce and noble kinswoman of mine, sure and true.

"I put my arms about her, placing a kiss on her brow. 'I can't say you're doing the right thing, cousin. But nor can I claim it wrong.'

"'Time will tell, I suppose. If this was wisdom or cowardice.'

"'You're no coward. I'm proud to have fought beside you, if only for a day.’

“She looked down at Lightbringer, the blade snug in its scabbard. Her sigh was almost lost in the howling wind. ‘Would that there had been more.’

“‘I’d ask a favor of you, Charlotte. Before you go.’

“‘Ask then.’

“I reached into my greatcoat, drawing out a book. It was bound in beaten, bloodstained leather, the sigil of our house embossed beside the initials *A.L.*

“‘Take this with you back to León. It belonged to my mama. That woman gave *everything* for me, and though these pages are all that’s left of her now, it’d be a comfort to know some small part of her was resting in the tomb of her famille.’

“I placed the book in Charlotte’s hands.

“‘It’s the last page of our lives that matters most.’

“She nodded, hugging me in farewell.

“‘Adieu, cousin.’ She glanced to Aaron behind me, Baptiste beside him. ‘May God and Mothermaid have mercy on your souls.’

“Aaron’s lip curled as he inclined his head. But my eyes were already on the man beside Charlotte. The ghostly glow of his aegis spilled over the snows about us, throwing long shadows between. His gaze was downturned, jaw clenched.

“‘You’re not going to cry, are you, youngblood?’

“He glanced up then, the flash of anger in him melting as he saw my smile.

“‘I just might, old man.’

“‘Come here, you little prick.’

“I opened my arms and Lachie stepped into them, closing tight. Much as I’d teased him, I felt tears sting my eyes as he squeezed me, hard enough to make my ribs creak.

“‘You have something you never had before, Lachie. I’ll not begrudge your want to defend it. I’m happy for you, little brother. I love you. Never forget it.’

“He sniffed thickly, pawing at his eyes. ‘Love ye, too.’

“He broke our embrace slow, whispered with cracking voice.

“‘Yer best bet is the pumpworks.’

“I blinked, not understanding.

“‘Into Augustin,’ he said. ‘They draw water up from the Béni, there’s intakes all around Rive Cœur. A lone man might get in under the ice unseen. They draw the flows up via La Rivière de Fer, though. So careful ye don’t get cooked.’

“‘Merci, Lachie.’

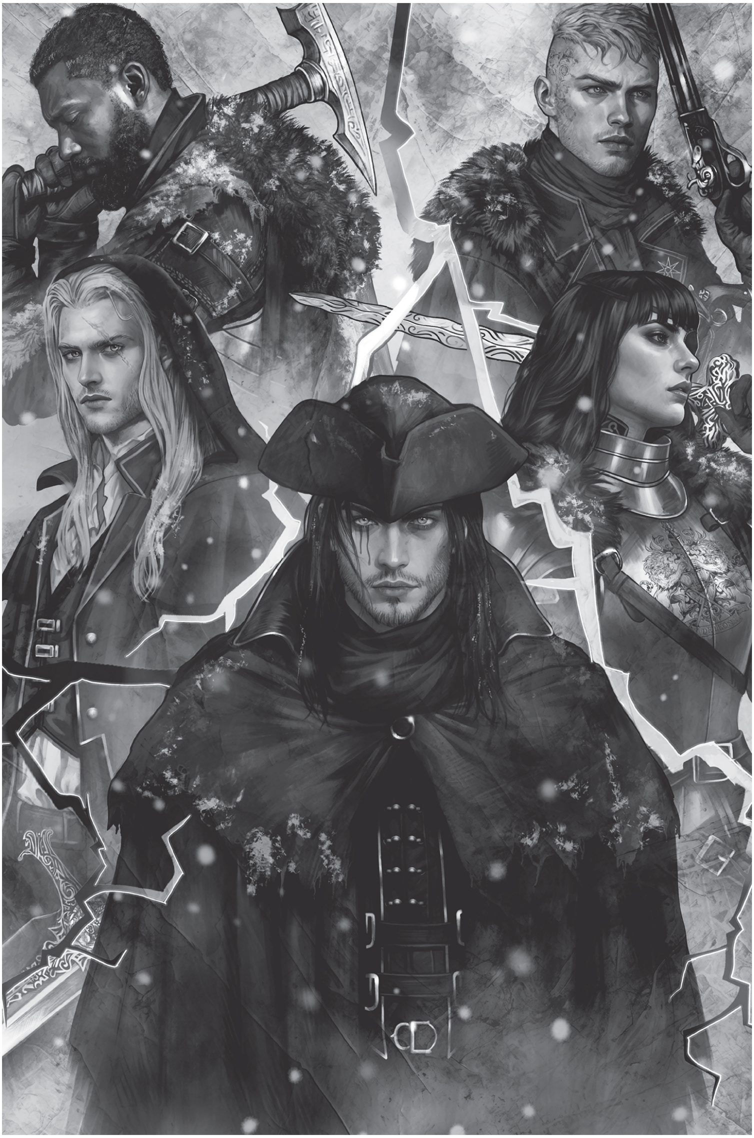
“‘Walk safe in the light, Gabe.’

“Lachlan dragged his nose across his sleeve, looking to Aaron and Baptiste.

"'Fare ye well, boys. Look after each other now.'

"'To be sure, wee squire.' Aaron smiled. 'To be sure.'

"'God bless you both,' Baptiste said. 'Mothermaid watch over you.'



"The pair nodded, Charlotte tucking Mama's journal inside her cloak, turning her collar against the wind. Lachie slipped his arm about her, and together, they joined the column of León troops heading north. I saw M. Cortez among and raised my hand in farewell. Smiling in kind, the forgemaster made the sign of the wheel, thumping one fist upon his chest. The grim dawn stained the horizon the color of blood, and somewhere in the keep behind, a rooster threw back his head, greeting the sun with a heartsick cry. Lachie turned back then, meeting my eyes, Voss's words ringing now in my mind.

"*I tell thee truly, boy, this night, afore the cock crows, thee and thy beloved shalt forsake thy brother dear.*

"And with heavy heart and heavy tread, my brother turned his back.

"'Think they'll make it?' Baptiste asked.

"'Doesn't matter what I think. Only what I do.'

"I turned to my brothers then, fists curling closed.

"'Let's go save Dior.'"

V

INTO THE DAWN

"AND SO WE come together." The historian entwined pale fingers on the tome in his lap. "Twin stars, weaving ever closer, colliding at last. You made it into Augustin via the pumpworks, de León, just as your pup á Craeg said you could. But not knowing where Lachance rested her pretty head, you stumbled into Princess á Maergenn instead. Your sister has already covered that end of the tale adequately."

"I *bet* she fucking did."

Celene only sneered. Dario stepped forth softly, placing a fresh bottle on the table before fading back into the shadows. But Jean-François looked only at his subject.

"I have one more inquiry, before we rejoin the dawn of Dior's most *joyous* day."

The Last Silversaint touched the gouges in his cheek, wincing. "And that is?"

"Where was your daughter while you infiltrated the empire's heart? Where were your brothers de Coste and Sa-Ismael when you stole into Château Impérial? And most importantly, where was the Forever King and his legion endless?"

"More and much the same place."

The Last Silversaint glanced to the bottle, lifted a brow in question.

"It's blood, not wine," Jean-François warned.

The silversaint's brow only rose higher. The historian rolled his eyes and pushed a goblet toward him.

“Help yourself.”

Gabriel swept the bottle up, and as the vampire opened his mouth to protest, pressed it to his lips and drank straight from the neck. The historian’s gaze drifted to the silversaint’s throat, hypnotized. But as if in reminder, a stab of pain lanced through his nethers, and the vampire snatched the bottle from the silversaint’s hands.

“That’s *quite* enough, de León. Answer the bloody question.”

Gabriel’s eyes were yet closed, lashes trembling as the flood washed over him.

“They were together, Chastain. Brothers. Daughter. King.”

The silversaint licked his lips, opening an eye once grey, now flushed red.

“I’d proposed my gambit to Voss the night Lachie and Charlotte left. But he’d taken much of the march south to reply. His legion moved swift; endless columns of Dead flesh and cadres of thralled steel in Voss colors, spurred through the rising storm. The Forever King’s court traveled with him, your niece and my sweet Patience among them. Ettiene led the march, still obviously gagging to rip my head off my shoulders. But Kestrel had departed, riding west with a small host of highbloods, bound for God knows where.

“That handful of nights seems like a dream now. The reprieve of a dead man on the way to the block. Despite the hand of fate and the teeth of time and the wall of death, my Patience and I were together again. And though the hours I spent with my daughter on that journey were the greatest gift I’d *ever* been granted, again, I’ll not speak of them. Count the fucks I give for your Empress’s desires on no hands, Chastain.”

Tears shone in that blood-red eye. The historian drummed his fingers on his tome.

“The Forever King obviously consented to your gambit in the end.”

The silversaint nodded. “My plan was basic enough. Steal into Augustin and convince Dior of the Esani’s treachery, or simply murder my sister and her mistress. Letting me into the capital was a gamble, and Voss knew it. But there are none who fear death more than those who live forever, and none who feared hell quite so much as the Forever King. In the end, Fabién agreed to my wager. But he took collateral, in case I decided to start dealing from the bottom of the deck.”

“Patience,” Jean-François murmured.

“And Baptiste.” Gabriel sighed, running bloody fingertips over the slowly healing splits in his lip. “Aaron would’ve come with me if I’d asked. But I was going in via the Béni. The water beneath her frozen surface. There was no vampire on earth who’d survive that swim. And so my brother stayed behind, safeguarding his love and mine.

“We stood together at the edge of dawn, as I prepared to ride for the river.

Voss had camped only a day's gallop from the walls of Augustin—the weather was so shite, and he'd murdered so many Elidaeni scouts by then, I doubted the Golden Host even knew he was there. But still, I knew I'd need to ride hard, slinging my saddle onto brave Argent's back as my boy stomped his hooves, breath steaming in the cold.

"Aaron looked southward, lips pressed thin. 'I wish…'

"'I know, Aaron. You just keep your wits about you and your eyes on the ones we love. I'll take care of the rest.'

"'If you fall … I will find a way, Gabriel. I shall save her, doubt it not.'

"'Not for a *second*.'

"'I got you something. For the road.'

"Frowning, I watched him fish inside his greatcoat. But I chuckled as he dragged it out—an old soldier's hipflask, scribed with the lions and crossed swords of León.

"'You shouldn't have, brother.' I smiled, unscrewing the lid for a sniff. 'Vodka?'

"Aaron watched my smile die, understanding dawn in my eyes.

"'Blood. Mine. You'll need your strength for what's ahead.'

"I sighed, the thirst uncoiling inside of me as I slipped that flask into my greatcoat.

"'No fear,' I whispered, embracing him tight.

"He nodded, squeezing me back. 'Only fury.'

"A coldness crept over us; all too familiar by then, but no less dreadful for our acquaintance. Aaron and I broke apart, and turning, I beheld that monster, that murderer, that King of Forever, gazing on me with eyes like an unfilled grave. Baptiste stood at his left, breath boiling in his chill, Ettiene looming behind my brother like a mountain in dark plate. To Fabién's right stood Morgane, wrapped in blood-red velvet. And before her, the Prince's cold hands resting upon her shoulders, I saw my angel, lips fresh rouged with blood. Fabién stared across the tumbling snows, Argent shying for the terror of him.

"*'A moment afore ye leave us, old friend.'*

"'You're leaving us, Papa?'

"Patience looked at me from the arc of Morgane's arms, bloody tears in her eyes.

"*'Oh weep not, my sweet, my love, my angel dear. This be not good-bye, but only briefest farewell. Thy noble father hath matters to attend, but he shall return anon, doubt it not. Never ever would he leave thee.'*

"'Does Papa Fabién speak true, Papa?'

"'Come here, love.'

"I knelt in the snow, and Patience ran to me, light as a doe, sobbing as she collided with my chest. I met Voss's eyes, my heart seething as I squeezed tight.

"'I'll be back, baby. I promise.'

"'I love you.'

"'I love *you*. Never ever forget it, no matter what comes.'

"She pulled back from my embrace, meeting my eyes. 'What's coming, Papa?'

"'A storm, baby. You stay close to Uncle Aaron and Uncle Baptiste until it passes. You mind what they tell you, oui? Be a good girl 'til I get back.'

"'Oui, Papa.'

"I tried to say more, but my throat seized closed with grief, and no more words would come. Instead I pulled her back into my arms, breathing the scent of her hair, feeling her cool cheek against mine. This beauty I'd made. All I had left of the bride I loved. The most precious jewel in my world, and I was *leaving* her, God Almighty…"

The silversaint shook his head.

"If one drop less had hung in the balance, I could never have let her go. But I thought of my *other* daughter, then. The one I'd left in the clutches of devils.

"'*Two days and nights I grant thee.*'

"Fabién's voice cut through brief warmth, turned my heart to ice once more.

"'*No more and no less. If sun hath set 'pon me and mine a second time with no word from thee, not responsible shall I be for the hell following.*'

"'I understand.'

"'*Fail me not, old friend.*'

"'I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it for every son and daughter, every babe unborn. And when next we see each other, Fabién, I swear God, you and I are going to have a long, *hard* talk. About what you did to Astrid. What you did to this *world*.'

"Voss only smiled, glancing to the barely brightening eastern skies. He made not a sound. But I knew it true now. No matter if all else he'd told us was lies. I could hear those words he'd spoken in the dining hall anew; an avalanche, crashing on all I'd known.

"*That great work, undone by hands so feeble and few?*

"Twenty-six years, we'd wondered. Twenty-six *years* of every pissant priest and pub philosopher and madman scrawling in shit posing their theory on the death of days. Some said a star had fallen across the sea, and its fires raised a smoke so thick, it blackened the sun. Some said there'd been another war in heaven, that God had thrown down the rebellious angels with such rancor the earth had been blasted skyward, hanging in a curtain between his kingdom and hell. But I knew the truth now.

"*That great work,* he'd called it. But what he meant, what he'd *wanted* to say…"

The Last Silversaint clenched his jaw, poison on his tongue.

“*My* great work.

“It had been *him*.

“Somehow. Some way.

“It had *always* been him.

“I remembered my vision then; that living dream I’d seen as I drank of Dior’s holy blood in León. The serpent that had eaten the city of my mama’s birth. That star shining over the Bay of Antoine. Wolves south. Ravens, east. And north, across Kingsgrave Bay and the grim Zamesk Mountains, rising above Charbourg’s ruins … that great hand. Its five fingers clawing upward from the earth, closing about the sun and tearing it from the sky.

“I met Fabién’s eyes, matching his smile.

“‘Soon.’

“And into the dawn, I rode.”

VI

ALWAYS

THE SILENCE WAS a bloodstain, spreading until it filled every corner of the cell.

The truth was smoke, cloying and foul to swallow.

“Voss.”

Jean-François brushed his quill across his lips, eyes on the silversaint.

“Daysdeath was Voss’s work.”

“Oui.”

Gabriel held out one shaking hand, gaze fixed on the bottle Jean-François had snatched away, now sitting on the cold stone beside his chair. With a sigh, the historian poured them both a goblet, lip curling as he saw the blood had already cooled. Caring not a drop, the silversaint snatched up the cup, drained it to the curdled dregs.

“I don’t understand.” Jean-François frowned. “If the Forever King was the source of this eternal darkness, why did it not end with him?”

Gabriel dragged his knuckles across clot-smeared lips. “Patience, coldblood.”

The historian rolled his eyes. “I suppose you’re right, mon ami. If good things come to those who wait, the grandest of things must surely be on our horizon. But I fear we have been neglecting our other guest.”

Jean-François gazed across the river, folding one long leg over the other.

“Are you well over there, Mlle Castia? You’ve not made so much as a peep of late. Most unlike you, to hold that serpent you name tongue twixt your teeth?”

The Last Liathe glowered. “Fear of immolation will do that to a girl.”

The Marquis chuckled. “You are no more a girl than I a *goat*. But come, enough from the Lion of Lorson. The sun—such as it is—is climbing higher, and when we left the Last of the Liathe, she was at something of a crossroads. Her brother imprisoned for Princess Reyne’s murder, destined for a day of slow torture at the hands of the Inquisition and a night of swift murder at the claws of his lover, Phoebe á Dúnnsair. Lachance’s wedding was proceeding apace, the square outside Cathédrale de Lumière thronged with onlookers, Mother Maryn overseeing proceedings from her perch by the window. And you had just wrested the truth of the Esani’s purpose from your dear Master Wulfric.”

“You’re quite good at this,” Celene said. “You should do it for a living.”

“That’s what I said,” Gabriel scowled.

“So how was the wedding?” Jean-François smiled.

“I’ve no idea,” Celene replied softly. “We didn’t watch it.”

The Last Liathe ran hard fingertips across oily stone, gaze drifting to the torches in the hands of the thrallsword cadre. Firelight flickered across pitch-black eyes, lost now as she stared into the mists of memory.

“We heard it, of course. I doubt there were many under heaven who didn’t. And our senses were so sharp, it was almost as if we *did* watch. The tolling of great bells to commence the procession. The cheers as the handsome Prince and his retinue appeared at the doors of Château Impérial, beginning the solemn march to the cathedral. The hubbub of chatter, falling to stillness thereafter, the hush of anticipation broken only by the song of thunder and the howl of hungry winds. And then … *rapture,* Marquis. The applause as the bride appeared was so loud it drowned out the crashing clouds, the roars so fierce they shook the very boughs of heaven. The bells began anew, the prayers of every citizen, their blessings, cries, wishes best, all rising until the entire city trembled, and we along with it. Joy. Hope. Happiness. A song so bright it almost drowned the darkness we’d found ourselves plunged into after Wulfric told us the truth.”

Celene shook her head, dragging a lock of hair from her bitter smile.

“But not quite.

“We lay in that coffin, wrestling with it all the day. The promise of salvation. The weight of annihilation. Bright angel on one shoulder, leering devil the other, drowning out the hymns of the choir in Cathédrale de Lumière as Dior began her march down the aisle.

“Maryn had lied to us. Lied to Dior. Reading the tale of daysdeath in our mind that first night in Dún Maergenn, and marrying it to the Esana prophecy, so that one was entwined with the other. The death of days. The blackened veil. Twisting Dior’s desire to bring back the sun toward the path of ending this world. And we had helped her.

“*Thou hast told her this? A believer, thou hast made her?*

“*We have, Mother. We need only for* you *to show her the way.*

“It was darkest deception. But I was a liar too. And we knew why she’d done it.

“*The greatest good …*

“The choice before us was an awful one, and I’ll admit we saw the terrible sense of Illia’s plan. Those mortals who had lived godly lives would be taken up on the Day of Judging and seated at the Father’s right hand. Only those who lived in sin would be punished, and what cared we for sinners—we who’d hunted them every night of our unlives? Were we not yet God’s punishment manifest on this earth?

“Was this not his will, and I, the monster his will had made me?

“O Lord of Love, O God of Blood,
“O King of Wolf and Lamb,
“Thy will be done,
“Thy judgment comes,
“Alike to bless’d and damned …

“To die was for us to burn, we knew this true, and always, I was *terrified* of those flames. But a voice in me was whispering now, ever louder as the day wore on. As Testaments were read and troth rings exchanged. As vows to love and honor and obey were spoken, as final hymns were sung, as happy husband and weary wife emerged into storm-struck light and the adulation of an empire. And finally, that question was all I could hear.

“*If threat of punishment was all that drove me to goodness, how could it be good?*

“Obedience under deception. Fealty under thrall. Love under fear.

“*How could* this *be holy?*

“The knock rang at our door, shaking me from darkest thoughts. I knew not how much time had passed, but I felt night drawing close now, chill creeping deeper in this shadow, no hindrance to the revelers we could hear outside.

“‘*Celene?* ’ Maryn called. ‘*It is time.*’

“We replied, loud enough to drown the quavering in our voice.

“‘*Coming, Mother.*’

“We dressed quickly; fresh garments crafted by the imperial seamstresses in preparation of this happy day. A new mask of pale porcelain, eyes rimmed black, and a smile, warm and genuine, painted in fresh red. A new frockcoat of dark heartsblood, golden embroidery and buttons, shining in the dying light. A shirt of white silk, crisp black britches, and knee-high boots polished to a sheen so bright we might have seen our reflection in them. But as we dragged them over hose-clad toes, the face we saw was *his*.

"*Evil we do,* Wulfric assured me. *Lest evil we be.*

"We walked side by side, the Mother and I—together but not alone. The air was thick, the soldiery on high alert after my brother's attack the previous eve. Maryn's hand had healed, but the terrible burns at her throat were only concealed by her nun's wimple. And we were flanked by our ever-watchful cadre of inquisitors.

"Every part of me was on edge, and I prayed as I walked. Whispering the Vow in my head and reaching for Maryn's hand to steady me. Though the Mother could sense my trepidation, I think *she* felt it too. The ceremony was done, the Grail wed to her Prince, the end of a story a *thousand* years in the telling only a coronation away. The hallways were flocked with servants and guards and guests, revelry in the city outside rising despite the awful weather. The feasting hall lay ahead, bunting on the walls, ice in our belly.

"*Hold firm, Celene,* Wulfric whispered. *Heaven awaits.*

"Doors were drawn wide, and a wave of sensation washed over us—the warmth of countless bodies and the perfume of woodsmoke and wine and blood. The feasting hall of Château Impérial was so vast, another château could almost have been built within, and every general and capitaine, priest and bishop, and marquis and baron in the empire seemed to be gathered therein. Knights in full platemail and bright tabards stood guard at every door and pillar, armor shining like looking glasses—this was a celebration, but a princess had been murdered by the empire's greatest hero the night before, and no chances were being taken with any other royal. An orchestra from the Opus Grande wove a spell of wondrous notes in the air, the dancefloor already filled, bodies entwined with their sorcerie. For a moment I was reminded of the gala in San Yves so many years ago, my first communion, the voices within me singing in time.

"It all felt so *surreal* …

"All this would be gone, soon. Either the Forever King would sweep it away, or the hand of God would claim his own. And in the motion of those dancers, the laughter of those revelers, beyond the color, light, movement, sound, we sensed a sadness in the roots of this happy day. One last desperate stab at life. One last dance before all songs ceased."

Celene smiled, hanging her head.

"But perhaps that was just me."

"And where was the blushing bride in all this?" Jean-François asked.

"With her husband. Sat at the head of the room, surrounded by her new famille, her back guarded by more steel-clad chevaliers. Even unable to read her thoughts, we could sense the shadow of Reyne's absence—the sadness in her eyes and the lack in her smile. But despite her grief, the Grail looked *radiant,* Marquis. Like God had plucked an angel from his kingdom and set her among we sinners to remind us what grace could be. Dior Lachance had been born a gutter rat. And now, she was the princess of an empire.

"She was clad in dove white, wasp waisted and pearl encrusted, trimmed with ash-pale fur. Ashdrinker hung at her waist in a jewel-studded scabbard, that golden wheel at her throat. But as we approached, flanked by our inquisitor guardians, we saw the glint of more gold on her skin. A troth ring, fresh forged, set with a ruby the size of a ha-royale. It was on the wrong hand of course, but the right finger at least, glittering in the glow of the hundred chandeliers overhead as she raised a goblet to her Prince.

"We swept the thoughts of the high table as we approached, brushing light upon each mind so as not to break their ice; the Pontifex's grudging admiration, the Inquisitrix's mild displeasure, Duchess Yvaine's fresh grief, thoughts of coming battle in Duke Maarten. Isabella sat at the right hand of the empty throne, but all knew it would not remain empty much longer. And though we sensed regret as we touched the Empress's thoughts, there was very little wrath—it seemed Dior had won over even her mother-in-law in the end.

"For his part, Philippe looked upon his new bride with fondness, if not love, smiling as he returned her toast. We wondered if they might have been happy together.

"We wondered what they'd have named their children …

"'*Courage, Celene.*'

"Maryn's whisper hung in the air, hand squeezing ours as we reached the high table.

"'Courage, Mother,' we replied, squeezing back. 'Judgment Comes.'

"'Celene!'

"We saw Dior rising, and though the shadow of sorrow yet lingered, she seemed truly happy to see us. Her smile was bright, and heedless of royal decorum, in front of all those generals and lords, she stepped down from the bridal seat and enfolded us in her arms. Her body was warm against ours, and despite it all, her whisper made us smile.

"'Good to see a friendly face, Castia.'

"'It is good to see you too, mon amie.'

"We pulled back from her arms, looking her over.

"'You look wonderful, Dior. Congratulations. Truly.'

"'*Aye, holy child.*' Maryn bowed low, no guile in her angel's face. '*Felicitations on this most blessed of days.*'

"'Merci, Maryn. You played no small part in it.'

"'*Thy praise, a kindness undeserved, child.*'

"'Nono, you deserve it,' Dior insisted. 'None of us would be here if not for you. I'll raise a toast to you this eve, I promise. So all might know what you've done for us.'

"'*Ye honor us, holy child.*'

"'Have you seen Phoebe?' Dior looked about with darkening brow. 'She was at the ceremony this afternoon, but she's disappeared.'

"I swallowed, thinking of the fleshwitch stealing toward my brother's cell in the Tower of Tears even now. I was grateful Gabriel was imprisoned on holy ground—there could be no temptation for me to attend his murder.

"Either to avert it. Or simply to watch.

"'I…'

"*'The Dahtr á Dúnnsair is thy faithful paladin, Dior.'* Maryn smiled, dark eyes gleaming. '*We are certain she shall be along presently.*'

"'Well, there's a place set for you and her both.' The Grail gestured to one of the feast tables, laden with wine and fare. 'It's not the high table, unfortunately. There's all sorts of royal protocol bollocks about who gets to sit with me, and Inquisitrix Maya still isn't fond of you, I'm afraid. But it's a place of honor.'

"*'Then we shall be honored to accept it, holy child.'*

"We nodded thanks, turned toward the place set aside. Two empty chairs waited at table's end, far enough from the other guests that they'd not be too discomfited by our presence. We saw Dior's Unbound there seated, among them Joaquin Marenn, crooked smile fixed upon a pretty demoiselle one table over. Brushing their thoughts, we felt joy. Pride. Trepidation at the coming battle, yet relief in this blessed respite.

"A tall chevalier stood near, his tabard that of a member of the Golden Host, a mighty ornate greatsword in gauntleted fists. And though royal accolades gleamed upon his chest, and his suit of fullplate shone like a mirror, looking now at Joaquin, at those Callums and Boyds and Declans, I thought them more deserving of acclaim than *any* knight. They had come so far. Held such faith. And not a one of them had wavered.

"*Not like me …*

"Maryn was padding toward the table, but Dior stopped me with a gentle touch. Turning back, we saw her lips curled in a teasing smile.

"'Want to dance?'

"We glanced at the crowds about us, folk already whispering behind their wine.

"'Is that … appropriate?'

"'I'm a Princess now. Fuck appropriate.'

"She saw my hesitation, teasing smile become a grin.

"'I still prefer girls with a pulse, Castia. But you'll do in a pinch.' Her smile dimmed then, gaze dropping to the floor. 'It's not like I've another to dance with.'

"'Of course.' We squeezed her hand, heart aching. 'Of *course* I'll dance with you.'

"Maryn matched my gaze, but with a glance to Dior, a small nod, she made her way to the place of honor among the Unbound. Several raised toasts to her as she sat, and our Priori gifted each man a smile and words of highest praise. Our eyes drifted to Phoebe's empty chair, our thoughts to the

Tower of Tears. But Dior took our hand, leading us onto the dancefloor.

"She was the bride, this was her day, and all about her made way. As if to banish any sorrows, she called to the Grand Masters '*Something faster, messieurs!* ' and the players obliged, the audience cheering as they launched into a bright jig called *The Jester's Cup*. Together, Dior and I spun through the dancers, and I found myself smiling, our fingers brushing, hands clapping in time. There was a blissful forgetting in that song. Refuge from the weight of the world, of God, of faith, beyond the edge of chorus and bridge and close. And we lost ourselves in it, Dior and I parting, shifting through the throng, swapping through half a dozen partners before arriving with each other once more.

"'You dance well, Princess,' we smiled.

"She grinned crooked, tossing ashen locks from flushed cheeks. 'Been practicing my swordwork. Gabe always said at root dancing and fighting were the same.'

"The warmth of the bodies, the flash of eye and smile, the blur of motion had us dizzy, and almost we'd forgot where we were. What was *happening*. But the mention of my brother brought me back to the ground, the smile behind our mask died. We caught sight of Maryn through the dancers, black eyes on us, Phoebe's chair beside her. We wondered if the fleshwitch had reached Gabriel yet. Wondered if she'd make it quick. Wondered what exactly we were prepared to sacrifice for what we believed.

"Our soul?

"Our self?

"We felt Maryn brush our thoughts then. The lightest touch, probing our resolve. And turning our heart to iron, we whispered a prayer to God for strength. *The Jester's Cup* had ended, the audience applauding, toasts raised to the bride for her excellent choice. With a bow of thanks, I made to leave.

"'Merci, Princess.'

"'Done already?'

"Dior looked at us with shining eyes, breath quickened. Her skin was sheened with sweat from her exertions—she was clad in a small hosier shop's worth of fabric after all, long ruffled sleeves and a belly-crushing corset. But still, she offered her hand.

"'One more?'

"I wanted to be gone. To slink back into shadow, unseen. I feared if she stared too long into my eyes, she might see what lay beyond. The lies. The hurt. This girl was my friend.

"This girl was my *only* friend.

"'One more.'

"'Something slower, s'il vous plaît!'

"The musicians struck the opening chords, and Dior offered her arms. We stepped into them, uncertain, but of course the Holy Grail of San Michon took the lead, steering us through the swirling ocean of bodies. Our head was spinning, guilt and fear and faith and fondness all at war, the voices ringing in my head now, none so loud as *he*. In every gold button, every clinking glass, we saw Wulfric's face, we heard his voice, we felt his will press upon us, the press of Maryn too, yet lurking in our thoughts. *Evil we do,* he whispered.

"*Evil we do, lest evil we be*.

"And then we recognized the song the musicians played. It was an avant-garde composition, as one might expect from masters of the Opus Grande. But still we knew those gossamer notes, resonating now in our bones. It was a *hymn*. A favorite of my childhood, sung in our tiny chapel in Lorson. The same Laurent had been playing the night I met him. The same Ashdrinker had been singing when I smashed her on those stones.

"*To Thee, My Heart.*

"All this would be gone soon. All these people. All these dreams. And the godly would be taken up, wouldn't they? What cared we for the sinners?

"O Lord of Love, O God of Blood,
"O King of Wolf and Lamb,
"Thy will be done,
"Thy judgment comes,
"Alike to bless'd and damned.
"Though Dead, by thy word I yet live,
"Though cursed, by thy will I now rise,
"Bonds earthly I sever, thy servant forever.
"And evil I do, lest evil I be,
"No more than the monster ye made me.

"The *monster*.

"The monster *they* made me.

"'Dior…'

"We whispered, porcelain cheek pressed to hers, our voice so soft and trembling we feared she might not hear us.

"'Dior, Maryn is lying to you.'

"We pulled her closer, and over her shoulder, through that swirling ocean of people that would soon be gone, we saw our Priori glowering at us. Thoughts pushing harder. The weight of her will pressing on ours, and a *terrible* fury rising beyond.

"*Celene …*

"'She slaved Phoebe,' we hissed. 'She commanded me to break Ashdrinker. She slew Reyne and blamed my brother, and even now, she plots his death. You are in danger near her, such *terrible* danger, my God…'

"*Celene, stop this at ONCE!*

“Dior drew back slightly, pale blue eyes piercing, tears spilling now from mine.

“‘I am *so* sorry, mon amie. I wanted so *desperately* to believe, but…’

“I shook my head.

“‘This is wrong. This is *sin*. And no matter the cost, I can be party to it no longer.’

“Dior stared, fallen still, though all the dancefloor still moved around us. And while her thoughts were ever a locked room, in her eyes, I saw not the shock or fear or betrayal I expected after such revelation. Instead, I saw the guile of a gutter rat who had risen to become the princess of an empire, but had *never* forgotten the streets she came from.

“Nor what it took to survive them.

“‘Well, well,’ she murmured.

“We smelled blood. The heady, *heavenly* bliss of her blood. And we realized while we had been giving our confession and Maryn had been raging in our head, Dior had slipped a silversteel dagger from one sleeve and sliced her wrist upon it. She already held it against our back, at the gap five ribs down, poised over our long-Dead heart.

“‘You might’ve just saved your life, Castia.’

“Maryn had risen to her feet, fury unleashed, eyes wide and face twisted in hatred. The Unbound about her sat watching, wondering, all the world fallen still, her mind piercing ours like a bloody spear as her claws tore her palms.

“*Betrayer! Deceiver! Thou shall BURN FOR THIS IN H—*

“The greatsword sang as it came down on her shoulder with the strength of the Moonsthrone Mountains. As powerful as her centuries had made her, still the blade cleaved muscle and bone, splitting her little body to her belly. The Mother of Monsters staggered, and as the blade was ripped free, she turned to face the one who wielded it.

“That knight. That tall knight of the Golden Host who’d stood guard at her back. He lifted his blade now, platemail polished like a mirror, greathelm concealing the face of the man within. But we’d have known his voice anywhere.

“‘Judgment Comes,’ my brother hissed.

“The crowd cried out as his greatsword fell again, glinting silver, whistling as it came. It struck Maryn’s neck, almost taking her head. But she was no fledgling, the Mother of Monsters. No mediae to be so easily slain. This was a creature who had survived the fall of Charbourg, the almost-end of Illia’s dream. Bringing her arm up, she shattered Gabriel’s blade with her little fist, fangs bared in a snarl. Metal shards flew, tumbling as if in slow motion, silversteel splinters drenched with blood.

“But not just Maryn’s.

“The fire started small; a single flare of light, deep in the hollow of the

Mother's chest. But within seconds it had burst, bubbled, *blossomed* into flame. And as holy fire spread like quicksilver over ancien flesh, consuming her pretty dress, her golden curls, we realized whose blood had anointed Gabriel's blade.

"Maryn screamed, the crowd with her, chaos breaking loose in the hall. Flames roared over her skin, chewing meat and bone as Dior looked on, pale blue eyes alight. And though she knew now her design might be undone, even more than failure, Maryn feared *death*. She feared the flames of hell. And so, as that holy fire spread and the mob screamed, the Mother bared her fangs and hissed.

"'*Not this night.*'

"The sound of tearing cloth. The song of ripping flesh. And before that awestruck crowd, Maryn burst apart—hundreds of moths, thousands of wings, red as the blood on Gabriel's shattered blade. Filling the air in a blinding, burning storm, that multitude fluttered toward the gables. The fire chased, spreading from one moth to the next, racing her toward the sky. But if only *one* of them escaped, Maryn would too.

"'Oui,' Dior hissed. '*This* night.'

"The Grail reached out her hand. That hand maimed in Dún Maergenn, defending the princess Maryn had slain. The Red Hand of God. And as we watched, awestruck, those thousand wings froze still. Dior's face twisted, eyes gleaming and cold, and we realized it was not simply swordcraft she had been practicing on the privacy of holy ground these last few weeks. We felt power reverberate within her, the power of the heavens in her veins, the power of He from whom all this had sprung."

The Last Silversaint nodded, murmuring into his cup.

"*But that His enemies would fear Him, grim Mahné gave the infant dominion over Death, and Sanael, the secrets of the Blood, and Gabriel, the Fire that would burn the pathway to His throne.*"

"Maryn burned," Celene sighed. "Flame spreading from one piece of her to the next, all those pieces now held still by Dior's holy will. We could hear her in our heads; her death throes echoing through every mind in that hall. It crashed upon us, blistering, sickening; a scream not just of Maryn's, but of every tortured soul she bore within her body. A scream of such blinding intensity that most of the wedding feast screamed in kind, crumbling to their knees or falling from their chairs in horror.

"We had never felt such terror nor fury nor despair, Marquis. Not even as we claimed great Aléne, Prince of Forever. Not even as we slew our master. For eight hundred and seventy-six years had the Mother of Monsters walked this earth with faithful feet. Near a millennium devoted to Illia's dream and the search for God's judgment true. Judgment was come, now. And as with all the damned, it fell not in Maryn's favor.

"My God, that *scream…*"

The Last Liathe looked skyward in wonder, voice gone soft.

"But with each piece of her that burned, it diminished. Fading, falling like the ashes now from the gables, grey snow on my skin. Her cries grew fainter, weaker, screaming become whispering, pleading, echoing in the still of our breast.

"O Lord of Love, O God of Blood.

"Forsake not thy servant true.

"I beg thee …

"I don't want to die …

"The voice fell silent. The hall quieted at last. And into that deathly still, Dior spoke.

"'A promise is a promise.'

"She stalked across the dancefloor, past gobsmacked guests scattered on their knees, beneath her Prince's bewildered gaze, snatching up the golden goblet from her place at the high table. And, tears in her lashes, she raised her cup in toast.

"'To Maryn. Mother of Monsters. That *all* might know what she did for us.'

"She knocked back the goblet, and spat red on the ashes at her feet.

"'Burn bright in hell, bitch.'

"Silence reigned, ringing in the hollow that music and laughter had filled but a few terrible moments before. Horror and wonder and fear were carved on the face of every guest, every soldier, every soul in that hall. Every soul save two.

"The two no foe nor failing could part forever. The two whose loyalty and love had been tested over and over on this long, hard road out of hell.

"Gabriel dragged off his greathelm and let it fall with a *clang*. My brother's eyes were rimmed in tears as he opened his arms. And into those arms, Dior *flew*. They crashed together, the chevalier in bloody silver, the bride in bloody white, and Dior's sob cut right to the heart of me. Gabriel held that girl as if she were driftwood and all the world a drowning sea. Dior held him as if he were an angel at wing, this cold earth crumbling beneath her feet. And though all had just borne witness to calamity, though a thousand questions roiled in a thousand minds, not a single person in that hall dared speak. It was as if all felt the sanctity in that moment; two people, both thought parted forever, reunited at last and never to be sundered again.

"'I'm so sorry,' he whispered. 'I'm sorry for everything, Dior.'

"'I know. Me too.'

"Dior's eyes were closed, brow pressed against that golden tabard, that chest beneath. But Gabriel's eyes were open, grey as raging skies, fixed on me. We stood yet in the dancefloor's heart, and more folk were looking our way now; soldiers uncertain, Unbound poised, not knowing the whole truth but understanding that if Maryn, Mother of Monsters, was an enemy, her faithful acolyte might be too.

"'You should take this,' Dior murmured. 'You should have her back.'

"From her waist, she unbuckled that jewel-studded scabbard, returning

Ashdrinker to her master. Gabriel took the sainted blade gently, eyes lit with pain as he drew her partway from her sheath, looking again at the awful crack in her blade. I know not what she said to him. If she made any sense at all. But as his gaze rose again to me, I saw it burned with a hatred bright as our long-lost sun.

"'Why didn't you kill her?'

"'She told me the truth.' Dior sniffed, turning to meet our stare. 'Told me everything.'

"'Your heart's too soft for your own good, girl.'

"'You're not my papa, old man.'

"My brother softened then, his hate forgot. And as he cupped Dior's cheek with one bloody hand, he spoke so soft we could barely hear.

"'Yes, I am.'

"She smiled then, eyes closed once more as she pressed her head against his chest.

"'Yes, you are. So trust me.'

"His jaw clenched. But beyond Gabriel's hate for me lay the love he bore for the daughter in his arms. A love forged in blood and silver. A love that *endured.*

"He sighed, squeezing tight.

"'Always.'"

VII

THE MYTH OF MESSIAH

"HOW?"

The question hung in the cold air, the black river's babble. Jean-François sat with tome in lap, quill poised in his fingers, eyes not on Celene now, but her brother.

"How did Lachance know?"

"I told her." Gabriel brushed a lock of blood-slicked hair from his still-healing cheek, staring at the sevenstar on his palm. "I told her everything. First thing Dior did when she heard about Reyne's murder was come and speak to me."

"But she was being observed. Maryn had motes all over the château."

"And Dior knew it." The silversaint sighed. "She was sharp as three swords, that girl, and she already knew Celene could spy on her. It only made sense Maryn could, too. So when she started to suspect something rotten among the Esani, Dior had relocated herself to the one place no vampire could watch her. Holy ground."

"The Pontifex's Palace," Jean-François said. "But Maryn surely kept motes elsewhere? Scattered about the château and grounds?"

"And the whole château was in chaos after Reyne's death. Soldiers and servants *everywhere*. Before she was a messiah, Dior was a cutpurse. A thief. A girl who'd spent her life stealing to live wouldn't have many problems stealing to my cell unseen. Especially when Maryn was being interrogated with Celene after the murder."

Gabriel shrugged.

"I told her everything. Phoebe. Ashdrinker. The Battle of San Maximille. The Forever King and the Esani and the horror Maryn intended to birth. And she believed me."

Jean-François scoffed. "Just like that?"

The Last Silversaint looked up then, his one good eye alight.

"I pity you, vampire," he sighed. "Your kind *lose* something when you turn. Not at first. It fades with time. With every night. Every murder. The mortals around you become food. Your kin become competitors. And though you cleave to bonds of fealty and famille, it's only rote and ritual. Remembered, not real. You forget what it is to love. You forget what it is to trust. You forget what it is to close your eyes and let yourself fall and *believe* those who care for you will catch you."

Gabriel hung his head, voice gone hoarse.

"But Dior believed. Even when I failed. She believed in *me*."

Jean-François stared across the dark cell, lips pinched thin. He searched within for it then—some ounce of affection, some tie beyond terror, some bond beyond blood—that would prove the silversaint a liar. But in truth, after all these years … who did he have?

A mother he feared? Lovers he slaved? Kin he loathed?

"When did she start to suspect?" he heard himself ask.

"After Phoebe returned. Dior was no fool, and something about Phoebe's tale felt ill. Put her on guard about Maryn. And after Reyne…"

"So her interrogation in your cell afterward with Celene and Phoebe…"

"A show."

It was the Liathe talking now, the Marquis's eyes drifting across the river.

"A test. To see how far we two might allow her to go. When Phoebe stopped Dior slaying Gabriel, she surmised the fleshwitch must only be slaved—commanded to do ill around her mistress, yet compelled to follow her heart as far as she could when alone."

"Dior spent the morning planning the blow from the Pontifex's Palace," Gabriel said. "There were so many runners, maidservants, messengers flying back and forth, it was impossible for Maryn to follow them all. And I was in the Tower of Tears, where no vampire could observe my replies. Soldiers and chevaliers everywhere, the noble quarter packed with onlookers, too much, too many, even for a mind like Maryn's to watch it all."

"I *had* wondered," Jean-François murmured, "why Lachance had gone ahead with her happiest day, after so tragic an eve before."

"Smokescreen." Gabriel smiled. "Nothing grander than a royal wedding."

"Sharp as three swords…"

The historian's murmur was soft beneath the scratching of his quill.

"So when á Dúnnsair came to murder you in the Tower of Tears…"

"We were ready. She fought like a fucking *wildcat*. Gave me these right here…" Gabriel dragged up his shirt, showed four long scars running up his ribs. "But though Phoebe served her mistress true, her heart just wasn't in it. And between me and the inquisitors now in on the game, we brought her down. Locked her up. But not before I dosed myself to the tits on her blood."

"Enough to strike down an ancien of eight hundred and seventy-six years."

"With a little help from a girl of eighteen."

The silence hung heavy, the scent of blood and the weight of iron in the air. The siblings stared at each other across those rushing waters, Celene's bottomless eyes narrowed, Gabriel's jaw clenched tight.

"She should have let me kill you," he hissed.

"I would have liked you to try. We can always make up for lost t—"

"Now, now, children," the Marquis said. "We were getting along *so* well. I would hate to ruin our newfound harmonie familiale with something so gauche as a beating. Or conflagration." Jean-François aimed a warning stare at Celene. "I believe *one* lion in this room has already run through her nine lives. Lachance had obviously made up her mind that you were for the chop at the feast with your Priori."

"Much as I think it pained her," Celene nodded. "In her mind, I was too far gone. Accomplice to the murder of her beloved. Happy to see my brother dead. It was only my confession that saved us. Instilling the notion we might yet be redeemed. She had every reason to hate me for all I'd done. But she was always a believer, Dior Lachance."

"More's the pity…"

"Chevalier, I will *not* warn you again."

The historian scowled, smoothing down a new page.

"So. I imagine this all went down *fabulously* with Dior's new in-laws."

"Like a fucking anvil," Gabriel growled. "But once the ashes had stopped tumbling from the rafters, and after a not-unexpected bout of bedlam among the guests, Dior called for order. She stood in the heart of that hall, all in white, spattered in red, dusted in grey. Despite the carnage all had just witnessed, there was a gravity to that girl none could deny. When last I'd seen her, near a *year* ago after the Battle of Maergenn, I could tell Dior had caught a glimpse of the power within her. But now, she'd come full to bloom without me. I suppose it's the fate of every parent—to let their children into the world to fly or fall on their own. I'd not have chosen to leave her when I did. But I could see how much she'd grown in my absence. The woman, the warrior, the redeemer she'd become.

"'Hear me! Good people, hear me now!'

"She held her hands wide, and all the hall fell still.

"But not silent.

"'What is the *meaning* of this?'

"The Empress was on her feet, knuckles planted on the table before her, and her sapphire eyes were knives. I'd known Isabella well in my youth—her favored chevalier, her servant and sword. I'd seen her upset before, but never quite so much as in that bloody hall. Though she'd married into power, Isabella was an Empress who took its trappings seriously. The pageantry and sanctity truly *meant* something to her. And she'd just seen her baby boy's wedding day befouled by murder and betrayal and the return of the champion who'd failed her so completely.

"'Bonsoir, Bella,' I bowed.

"'*You* I will deal with later!' she snarled, eyes on Dior. '*You* I deal with now! What is this treachery? This blasphemy? The heir to the Augustin dynasty is wed to you at the behest of a creature you have just slain before our eyes! This is *madness*! This is—'

"'Mother, please.'

"Prince Philippe looked to the Empress, his face grim.

"'Let her speak.'

"The Empress glowered. 'Commands be not spat to they who sit thrones, young Prince. I am Isabella, First of Her Name, beloved widow of Alexandre III—'

"'And I am your *son*!' Philippe shouted, slamming down his fist. 'Perhaps not your favorite, but I *am* your last! Empress of the realm you are, but you speak now to its heir and his bride besides! So while justified it may be, set outrage aside, and let her say her piece!'

"Dior and Philippe met each other's eyes then.

"'Respect is earned, not owed, Mother. And she has surely earned ours.'

"The Grail inclined her head to her husband. And as Isabella looked upon her son with waking eyes, Dior walked slow to the high table. Spattered in blood, dusted with ashes, she looked up at Philippe and smiled sadly. And with a wince of difficulty for her maimed hand, she dragged the ring off her finger and placed it before him.

"'You're a good man, Philippe de Augustin. And I'm sorry. But I can't keep this now.'

"Murmurs, whispers, cries of outrage rang in the hall as Dior returned the Prince's troth. And turning to the court, she raised her voice loud enough to drown them all.

"'We've been deceived! Me among you, and most of all!' Dior looked out upon the court, pale blue eyes wide. 'Though they came in guise of friends, the Esani were nothing close. And though I've lived under their lie for near a year now…'

"She took a deep breath then, staring into her own abyss.

"'… My blood is *not* the secret to ending daysdeath. I'm sorry. But near as I can tell, it's not the secret to ending *anything* but this world.'

"Murmurs began again among the guests, rising toward a roar.

"'There's none in this room who feels so much a fool as me!' Dior cried. 'I heard what I *wanted* to hear! The myth of messiah is a heady draught, mes amis, never so tempting as when the messiah is *you*. But you were lied to, same as me. And same as me, you *chose* to believe. It's the sweetest deceit, to be told someone else is coming to save you. That all weight rests on another's shoulders, save the burden for you to have faith. And I'm sorry I asked you to have it in me. Because truth is, there's no one person who can stop what's coming. No redeemer who can save us now.'

"She shook her head, hands clasped as she searched every eye, every soul in that hall. A single tear spilled down her cheek, shining as it fell to the floor.

"'A good friend once told me this is a world worth fighting for. I know it's one worth dying for. But if there is a savior now, it's in *all* of us.'"

The Last Silversaint leaned forward, elbows to knees, running a thumb over the ink on his knuckles. His voice was graveled, thick with grief.

"My heart chilled a little at those words. *A world worth dying for.* I wondered if the mantle of savior had been a burden Dior was glad to be rid of. If the grief for her lost beloved, the guilt she felt at being so deceived might be matched by some desire to atone. Dior Lachance couldn't be a savior anymore. But she *could* be a martyr.

"Yet in that quiet, the eyes of every guest upon her and the ashes of prophecy scattered at her feet, one figure stepped forth. He was still little more than a boy, truth told. A boy who'd ridden with her through fire and blood.

"'Bleed for me. As I bleed for you.'

"Joaquin Marenn looked only upon Dior. But he raised his voice to all.

"'So you asked us at Lastbridge. After you freed us from bondage beneath the Blackheart's boot. Before you struck the Iron Maiden's claw from her wrist and risked everything for the sake of this city. I've watched you every day, walking among the wounded and making them well. I've seen you give your every waking moment for the betterment of people you've never met, strangers you owe *nothing*. I've seen you bleed an ocean, Dior Lachance. And I will bleed no less. You are still a savior to me.'

"Joaquin raised hand to heart, forefinger and thumb outstretched.

"'La demoiselle du Graal.'

"His eyes shone with unspent tears, but jaw clenched, the houndboy didn't let them fall. Another man stepped forth, clad in Dior's cloth, finger and thumb to his heart.

"'For the Grail.'

"And so it went, Dior's Unbound all stepping forward with undimmed love in their eyes. She'd saved them from the abyss, remember—none could fault their loyalty, nor love. But a strange thing happened then, coldblood. My heart warming as I saw one of those knights in Augustin colors lifting forefinger and thumb to his heart.

"'For the Grail,' he declared.

"As I watched, more folk around that hall did likesame. Parents of lads she'd revived at Lastbridge. Comrades of those healed by her touch. Folk whose lives she'd saved. But this was more than simple restitution—these weren't just people who'd benefitted from her sacrifice. They saw what she represented. The grace that resides in the heart of all goodness. A faith beyond scripture or Testament or heavenly law. It matters not what you believe in, Historian. But you must believe in *something*."

The Last Silversaint smiled.

"And like me, they chose to believe in her."

"We stepped forward with the others," Celene said. "Unworthy though we were. The voices within me were as quiet as I could remember—silenced both for Maryn's absence and the shock of all that had transpired. We knew not what we were now. Liathe? Lunatic? The foundation of our faith had been smote to ruins. I had given up all I believed. But placing our hand over our Dead heart, we spoke those same words.

"*'For the Grail.'*

"My brother met my eyes, that red sword in his hands. I could see the question in his stare—if I could be trusted after all I'd done. Uncertainty still hung over the feasting hall, even as Prince Philippe pressed forefinger and thumb to his chest. But beneath the call of Dior's name in Château Impérial, we heard it then, cutting through all doubt like a blade of silver. A song, growing louder as it spread across ice-struck battlements and the snow-thick streets of Rive Nord, echoing now among the drunken revelers in Rive Cœur.

"The song of warning bells."

"*Two days and nights I grant thee.*" The historian looked up from the page he'd thumbed back to, meeting the silversaint's eyes. "And he'd camped but one night's march from the River Béni. You'd done all he'd asked, de León. Like a faithful hound. Saved the realm from the threat he himself couldn't snuff out directly. Saved the life of the girl he prized above all. Your friends and daughter in his clutches still. And just as your brother á Craeg had promised, just as you *knew* he must, he'd betrayed you."

The Last Silversaint held out his goblet.

Jean-François poured the bottle's clotted last into the cup.

"The Forever King was coming."

VIII

TO THE FLOOD

“BELLS RINGING, BOOTS pounding, heart thundering, I ran.”

Gabriel drank from his goblet, wincing at the souring taste. His face had taken on a familiar, faraway expression, as if he stared into memory and distance both. Jean-François could hear the silversaint’s pulse quickening now, as it often did when he began recounting tales of his battles. But as always, the historian found himself quickened likesame, as if through the silversaint’s words, he lived those glories too.

I will miss this when it’s over.

And it will be over soon.

“Out from the château,” Gabriel said, “across the plaza, toward the Tower of Tears. The square was in uproar, capitaines bellowing for the revelers to get indoors, bells pealing on cold streets and cadres of troops flooding toward the walls. That blighted blood yet pounded within me, the Moonsthrone’s strength in my veins, and I’d not even lost my breath as I barreled through the great spiked doors, past rows of red-clad thugs and up the spiraling stairs until I’d reached her cell. And there I found her, pacing back and forth behind bars of cold iron, granite walls rent by her talons, tears upon her cheeks.

“‘Phoebe,’ I breathed.

“She met my eyes then—rage and sorrow and shame all swimming in the gold.

“‘Oh, sweet Mothermoons—’

"'Get it open,' I demanded, looking to the keyman nearby. 'Now!'

"Her face was already crumpling as the keys twisted in the lock, breath hissing through her teeth as I wrenched the door wide. And then she was in my arms, warm and wild and weeping, talons scraping across the breastplate I still wore.

"'I'm sorry Moons I'm so sorry Gabe she made me she *made me* do it that fuckin—'

"'I know,' I murmured, swaying as I held her close. 'I know, it's aright, Phoebe.'

"'It's *nae* aright! She *slaved* me, Gabriel! I could see it all and do naught to stop it! I felt like I was screaming underwater, just fuckin' *screaming* and none could hear, Mountains and Moons when I get my claws in that little cu—'

"'Maryn's dead, Phoebe. Dior and I ended her, and freed you likesame.'

"'*Dior*. Oh, Moons, is she—'

"'I'm h-here, Phoebe.'

"The voice was breathless, its owner bent double at the top of the stairs in her bloodstained gown, clutching the stitch in her side. At the sight of her, Phoebe tore herself from my arms and crashed into Dior's, pushing her face into the girl's hair as she pleaded.

"'Flower, forgive me, I couldnae stop meself, I *tried,* Moons help me—'

"'It's aright,' Dior whispered, holding tight. 'There's nothing to forgive.'

"'I lied to Gabe, I lied to ye! I stole his blade, I steered ye wrong, if nae for me—'

"'No, don't do that.' Dior cupped Phoebe's cheeks, meeting tear-stung eyes. '*None* of this was your fault, you hear? Maryn deceived every one of us, me most of all. I wanted to believe her, Phoebe. I *wanted* it to be real. If anyone's to blame for this mess, it's me.'

"'That's not true, Dior,' I told her. 'She used you. She used the *good* in you. These vipers turn the best of us against ourselves. It's what they do. It's what they are.'

"Phoebe lifted one hand toward me, unwilling to be parted from Dior. And stepping to their sides, I caught them up in my arms. Phoebe was fighting sobs, shaking with rage, head hung low as she snarled against my tearstained tabard.

"'I can still almost feel her in my head. That cursed little *worm*. Mountains and Moons, I wish I'd been there to watch her die. I hope ye made her scream, Gabe. I pray they both fuckin' *screamed* as ye sent them off to hell.'

"Dior met my eyes then. 'Phoebe…'

"'Celene is still alive, Phoebe,' I said. 'We spared her life.'

"'*What?* ' Golden eyes caught fire as she lifted her head, tail lashing as she spat, 'No, no, NO, she was party to it *all*! She shattered Ashdrinker, Gabe, she'd have let y—'

"'We know what she did, Phoebe. She told Dior all of it.'

"'Of course she did, that snake would do *anything* to save her fuckin' skin!'

"'She confessed *before* Maryn died, Phoebe. She'd no reason to say anything, save it was right.' Dior met the duskdancer's eyes, shaking her head. 'Gabe was all for ending her. This was *my* decision. But trust me, sister. I don't know why nor what, but I can feel in my gut Celene has some part to play in all this before the end.'

"'And that end is here.' I took a breath, letting the song of those bells fill the silence. '*Voss* is here, Phoebe. He's brought all hell with him.'

"She refused to meet my eyes, flame-red braids tumbling about her cheeks as she hung her head. But I touched her chin, tried to lift her gaze to mine.

"'Phoebe—'

"'She made me her dog, Gabriel. She made me her pawn.'

"'You're no pawn, Phoebe á Dúnnsair. You're a *queen*.'

"She clenched her jaw, misgiving and guilt swimming in hunter's eyes. She'd been made a catspaw of the Dead, used to hurt the folk she cared for. To be without blame is not always to be without shame. But truth was, she deserved none of it.

"'Stand with me,' I urged. '*Beside* me. Let whatever wrongs we wrought be washed away in the flood we make, Phoebe. We have *blood* to spill tonight.'

"Phoebe breathed deep, finally meeting my eyes as I spoke those words. Still it swam with hurt, but I saw that golden gaze run to iron then.

"'Aye, then. To the flood.'

"She stood on tiptoe and kissed me, hot and brief and sharp, blooding my lips with her teeth as we parted, fire in her eyes.

"'I still don't love ye, Gabriel de León.'

"'I don't love you, too.'

"Inquisitors and soldiers were spilling from the Tower as we descended. Across the city, families were gathering behind locked doors and loved ones embracing farewell, soldiers taking up blades and marching to the walls to the tune of those dreadful bells. Dior's Unbound awaited below; a hundred-strong cadre clad in mail and tabards trimmed in gold, swords and axes run through with silver held in waiting fists. As we marched out to greet them, Joaquin winked at Phoebe, nodded to me.

"'Well, well,' I said. 'Joaquin Joaquin Marenn. Still alive, I see.'

"'Not for lack of trying, Chevalier.'

"The houndboy flashed a smile, hefted a clothbound bundle, and tossed it to Dior. The girl barely managed to catch it, grunting as it struck her chest.

"'Watch the tits, M. Marenn.'

"'Tried my best. Couldn't find them anywhere.'

"'Fuck you,' she scoffed.

"'No time, alas. But as always, I'm flattered by the offer.'

"The charming little bastard winked in a way that put me a little offside, but as Dior unbound the bundle he'd tossed her, I had to grant him some credit. A good pair of heavy leathers and boots were wrapped within, a hauberk of mail and a long coat of quilted cloth, embroidered with chalices and flames. Joaquin tipped an imaginary hat.

"'Thought you should at least dress for the occasion. We've a war to fight.'

"'Not just fight, M. Marenn. This is a war we musssst win.'

"All eyes turned to Celene as she stepped from the gloom. She was clad in her red greatcoat, black leathers, her porcelain mask painted in a savage, saw-toothed grin. Phoebe bristled, talons curling, teeth clenched. I couldn't blame her a jot for her rage—God knows I was still sore-tempted to bury my sister then and there.

"'Celene's right,' Dior said, cutting the stays on her corset. 'If Voss takes Augustin, that's the game. No matter what misgivings lie between us, we have to set them aside. Every man, woman, and child in this city depends on us.'

"'Or, you may simply end me right here, flesssshwitch.'

"Phoebe glared at Celene, eyes burning.

"'If that isss your wish,' my sister said, 'I understand. I have wronged you, Phoebe á Dúnnsair. And I am sssorry for it. But if blood demands blood, we'll not ssstop you.'

"Celene sank slowly to her knees, like a prisoner at the headsman's block. Stillness fell, despite the rising chaos around us, my heart quickening as Phoebe stalked toward my sister. Dior was halfway out of her dress, pausing as Celene unbuttoned her collar, parting that blood-red velvet to reveal the marble of her chest beneath. Phoebe's eyes were locked on the place my sister's heart resided, the talons on her right hand unfurled and glittering. She moved with a predator's grace, tail switching back and forth, breath hissing as she closed in. Celene only lifted her chin, eyes slipping closed.

"Waiting.

"I knew not how to feel. Celene's betrayal had almost cost us everything. But who was I to begrudge her another chance? When Dior had granted me the same?

"My heart fell still as Phoebe reached out, lifting Celene's mask away. I could see the ravages of Laure Voss's claws beneath, that flesh peeled off the face I knew so well. Her wounds were not as bad as they'd been before she'd consumed Aléne, but still grim to behold. I thought about the hurts the Voss had dealt us both. Wondering if we'd ever heal.

"Celene opened her eyes, gazing up at her executioner. Snows fell gentle between them, thunder holding its breath, Dior gasping as Phoebe raised gleaming black talons.

"'No, d—'

"Phoebe's hand came down like lightning—not a deathblow, but a slap, heavy and savage. Blood sprayed, the *crack* of flesh ringing louder than crashing clouds and marching boots, the bellowed orders to battle, the doom of our time.

"'They come! The Forever King is come!'

"'We've a war to win,' Phoebe snarled.

"And jaw set, she marched toward the walls."

IX

A SMALL PRICE

“RIVE NORD WAS yet in bloody ruins.”

The Last Silversaint leaned back in his armchair, leathers creaking, thumb tracing the silver of his daughter’s name beneath his knuckles as he stared into the past.

“It’d been near half a year since Voss struck the capital, but the scars of his attack still ran deep. Most folk who’d called Augustin’s northern shore home had relocated to its heart, most of the buildings empty shells. Isabella had ordered the outer walls repaired, the gatehouses too, and they stood strong and tall. But Augustin’s norward shore was bereft of any save soldiers now—the few citizens who still dwelled there flooding back across Lastbridge as those bells rang. There was something altogether strange about the thought of fighting to protect a city nobody lived in anymore.

“We should never have staged a defense of those walls. The Golden Host should’ve just pulled back to Rive Cœur and fought there. The inner battlements were fully intact, the cannon were legion, and blowing Lastbridge would’ve forced the Dead to scale the cliffs up from the Béni’s surface. If it were up to me, we’d have left Rive Nord to the Voss.”

Gabriel sighed.

“Thing is, it *wasn’t* up to me. Twenty thousand men were mustering on the outer battlements, another ten in reserve at the Lastbridge walls across town. That was near half Augustin’s force, only forty thousand left to defend the Cœur if things went tits up.”

"You were a hero of the realm," Jean-François said, sketching in his tome. "Slayer of Princes of Forever, victor of Dún Maergenn, liberator—"

"Weren't you the one whining about me listing all my accolades not so long ago, coldblood? I thought we were running out of fucking time here."

"My point is, in organizing the defense, surely your opinion held weight?"

"Barely a feather's worth. Isabella was still pissed at me, the Inquisition beside her. Though I was still technically a Sword of the Realm, I'd no rank in the Golden Host. And though every soldier in that army had been raised on tales of my old glories—of Tuuve and Báih Sìde and Triúrbaile—as far as the Empress's commanders were concerned, I was a novelty, little more."

"Who then led the valiant defense of Isabella's throne?"

"Maarten, Duke of Daggercoast, was put in charge of the Nord. Prince Philippe took command of the Cœur." Gabriel shrugged. "At first, we were just along for the ride. But Maarten wasn't a complete twat. He knew the value Dior held, how grand a banner la demoiselle du Graal would be to fight beneath. And so he asked her—and by extension *us*—not to stray too far from his side."

"Lachance insisted on fighting? I'm certain you were pleased at that, de León."

"Not like I could stop her. I'd failed every time I'd tried, and now I couldn't even point out she was the one true hope of the realm. Dior was just one young woman now. Still a duskdancer, of course. Still a sanguimancer. Still a child of the Redeemer's line. But no hinge on which this all pivoted. She was harder to kill now than most men on that wall, so she resolved to save as many lives as she could."

"She *cared*, Historian."

The silversaint and Marquis both looked at the monster across the river. Celene stared back with eyes black as night, edged with sadness.

"She *truly* cared."

"Night had fallen hard, and the tempest with it," Gabriel continued. "That storm was a *bastard,* coldblood. Unnatural, even for wintersdeep. Wind like swords, snow like razors. We stood on the outermost wall above the Nord's main gatehouse, the thoroughfare behind us leading back to Place San Antoine and Lastbridge. The span wasn't even rigged to blow anymore—the Dead could just march across the Béni to the Cœur's walls now. I'd wondered what they'd done with all that black ignis at the time.

"Phoebe stood to my right, Dior my left, Celene and Joaquin and the other Unbound all about us. Soldiers and battlepriests were arrayed across the ramparts, cadres of archers and cannoneers training their sights on the empty night. The dark was so thick you could've bottled it, and beyond the light of the braziers on the battlements, there was *nothing* save tumbling grey snows. No stars above. No drymoat below. Just blackness and the song of those tolling bells, and the fear every little boy feels when he opens his eyes in the deepest dark of night and can still see nothing at all.

"'Anyone scared o' the dark?' Phoebe murmured.

"'Never used to be,' Dior replied.

"'I don't suppose you've learned how to sprout those wings from your arse, Mlle Phoebe?' Joaquin asked. 'We could use that army of your kinsmen right now.'

"Phoebe patted her rump, tail switching back and forth. 'Still wingless, alas.'

"'Spectacular, nonetheless.'

"Phoebe scoffed at my jest, smacking my backside as Joaquin clenched his jaw.

"'I hope Elaina will be aright.'

"'She'll be fine in the kennels. I'd be less worried about yer hound an' more yerself.'

"Joaquin nodded, face gone pale. 'The company's magnificent, no doubt. But if I could choose any place in the world to be right now, the last of them would be here.'

"He shook his head, fists clenched to stop his hands trembling.

"'God's truth, I wish today had never dawned.'

"'Don't do that, lad.'

"Joaquin looked to me as I spoke, but my eyes were fixed on that darkness. I knew the fear he felt. The men around us felt the same. And while I was never really one for speeches, I knew the weight words could hold before the storm.

"'Never regret a single day. The worst give us lessons. The best gift us memories. But *all of them* are sacred. And this day is the most important of your life. Make it count.'

"Joaquin smiled at that.

"Phoebe kissed my cheek.

"Dior squeezed my hand.

"A light flared then, pale and chymical. One tiny drop in that ocean of black."

The Last Silversaint fell silent, blood-red eyes narrowed.

"What did you see?" Jean-François asked, voice hushed.

"Highbloods," Celene replied. "A cohort of Voss knights in dark plate, at least twenty strong, mounted on thralled steeds but a few dozen yards from the drymoat's edge. Though we searched, we could not see Kestrel among them. But another Dead capitaine with a greathelm wrought like a raven and a cloak of black feathers nudged his horse forward. In one hand, he held that light, and in his other, he bore a cruel maul of black steel, twinned head fashioned like ravens' beaks. About its haft, a flag of white was bound.

"The highblood took off his helm and I saw a dark beard, thick hair swept back in a widow's peak, marble skin and bottomless eyes.

"'Ettiene,' Gabriel growled. 'The Black Crow. Fourth Prince of Forever.'

"*'Parley! '* he cried, holding the maul aloft. '*We call parley, mortals! '*

"All eyes turned to Duke Maarten, stood with his commanders but a few feet away. He was a bear of a man, clad in fine platemail and a blue tabard embroidered with falcons. He squared his bearded chin, breathing deep, calling into that bottomless night.

"'Come forth then, leech! Speak your cursed piece!'

"The Black Crow looked to the night behind him. More light flared then. Chymical, unwavering; another globe unveiled. More globes followed, five in all, lighting up in a circle and spilling their pale glow into that gulf of perfect darkness. Each globe was housed within a human skull, cupped in the hands of black-clad thralls, their robes whipping in the freezing storm winds. And in the heart of them, he stood like death itself. Pale as wintersdeep, and a thousand times as chill.

"Fabién Voss.

"We had never seen Forever's King in flesh before, Marquis. And as we gazed at him from atop those walls, he seemed to swell until he filled our sight and soul besides. Eyes of night and skin of marble, flowing like iron molten. He walked toward us, no footprints behind, fingertips pressed together as his five shadows writhed. He was clad in white velvet and a mantle of terror, surrounded by figures in black, skulls aglow. The walls seemed to shiver at his approach. God Almighty, even the *snows* seemed frightened to touch his skin.

"*'Greetings to thee, sons and daughters of Augustin.'*

"His words echoed on the winds and in our minds, and we could feel the fear about us, spreading like poison. Even the boldest heart quavered as his black gaze fell upon them. Even the most faithful man of God doubted the love of his Lord.

"*'With whom shall I treat? '*

"He looked across the walls, pausing brief upon my brother, the barest hint of a smile curling his lips. But Gabriel held his peace, looked instead to Maarten.

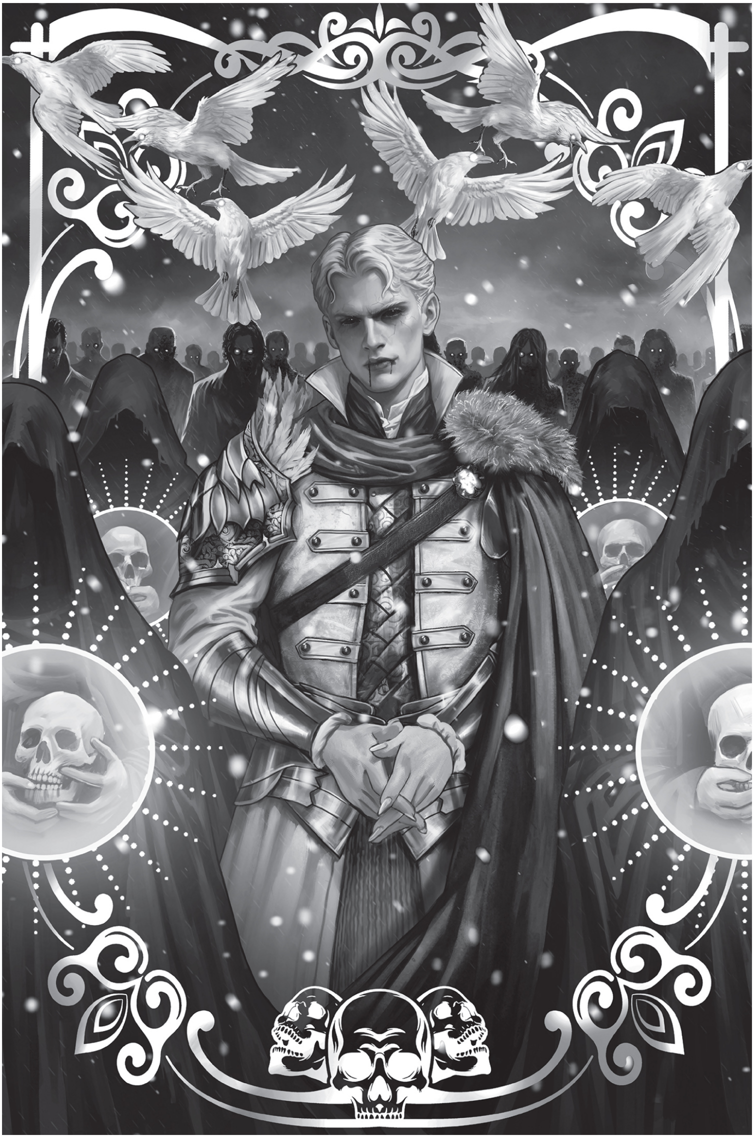
"'I speak for Her Grace Isabella!' the Duke called. 'First of Her Name, beloved widow of Alexandre III, Protector of God's Church and ruler of all Elidaen!'

"*'Maarten de La Fontaine, le Chevalier des Faucons. My honor, sir, to meet a warrior so esteemed. The cloak I shall craft of thy skin shall be worn only on grandest of occasions.'*

"'Bark as you will, dog! But I vow before God and Mothermaid you'll set not one *foot* in sacred Augustin! If hollow threats be the best of you, then let's be about it! These winds are cold, my bed is warm, and the company therein more pleasant than yours!'

"*'So we hear. And well hath Isabella chosen her champion. A capitaine so bold* *as to bring both wife and daughters to the city he be bound to defend.'*

"That smile spread Voss's mouth like a bloodstain.



"'*Forward look I, to making their acquaintance.'*

"'Keep him out of your head, Fontaine.' Gabriel's eyes were fixed on Voss, but his growl was for the Duke. 'Think not of those you care for, nor your stratagems, lest he plu—'

"'Hold your tongue, de León,' Maarten hissed. 'I know how to fight the

Dead.’

“And to the Forever King, he roared.

“‘Is that it, Voss? Hollow threats from toothless jaws?’

“*‘Threats? ’*

“Voss took one step closer, gaze falling on the Duke like an avalanche.

“*‘Nay, Chevalier. No threat speak I, but vow. And to each here assembled, I gift it true. Swift this night ye may die, sons and daughters of Elidaen, shouldst thy callow God grant mercy. But to thy loved ones cowering beyond these walls, Fabién Voss shall show* none. *I shall visit that warm bed ye made mention of, brave Duke, and oh, so sweetly teach thy bride Yvaine the price of her husband’s defiance. To my men, shall thy daughters be thrown. Elodie. Fleur. Little Remi. As lambs to hungry wolves shall thy angels be.’*

“Maarten glowered, jaw clenched. But that black gaze swept the walls, the soldiers beneath it quailing. And one by one, Voss called their names into the night.

“*‘Thy mother, Claude Arnaud. Thy sisters three, Alfric Charron. Thy dear old papa, Talyn Lambert. Their names know I, their faces also, and of them shall I make exception to simple slaughter. Of tortures divine shall I teach thy loved ones, Augustin. And long after thy corpses have cooled shall their screams ring over the* ruin *I shall make of these walls.’*

“Voss tilted his head then, smile fading.

“*‘Or I can simply depart.’*

“Maarten frowned, scoffing now. ‘Depart?’

“Fabién extended one hand, frowning at the claws that tipped his fingers.

“*‘Weary of war, be I. Eighteen years be an eternity to march to its wretched drum, and the cries of cattle be not the symphony once they were. I long for softer songs.’*

“‘Why in God’s name would you depart after coming so far?’

“*‘Thou shalt grant me boon in payment, Duke de La Fontaine. Only just, Fabién’s price. To preserve thy families dearest, thou shalt reunite me with mine own.’*

“That pale hand rose, pointing now at the girl behind me.

“*‘Her.’*

“Dior had stood silently through all this, jaw clenched, pale blue eyes watering in that screaming wintersdeep wind. As Fabién’s gaze fell upon her, every one of her Unbound drew their blades, surrounding her in a ring of steel. But she pushed through, unafraid, leaning on the battlements as she spat her defiance.

“‘You’re a *fucking liar*!’

“*‘No liar I, child. Thy kinsman I be, brother to the Redeemer who seeded thy line entire. Ask thy dear Gabriel if—’*

“‘He told me already!’

“Voss blinked, as if he had forgotten what it was to be interrupted. For my part, I was amazed at this revelation—that at root, Dior and Voss might be of the same blood. But Dior charged on, unafeared, fists upon the stone, fire in her eyes.

"'Maybe it's even true! Maybe you *were* his brother! But that's not why you want me, fucker! We're supposed to believe you dragged an army tens of thousands strong all the way from Talhost to here and, what, now you'll just piss off so we can play happy familles in the snow? I can smell the *shit* you're shoveling all the way up here!'

"She climbed onto the battlements then, loud enough to be heard all along the wall.

"'*Dead tongues heeded are Dead tongues tasted!*'

"Voss stared at Dior, a long and silent age. The wind howled between, not a hair on his head moved by it, the grey flurries falling everywhere save on his skin.

"And finally, his stare shifted to my brother.

"'*What say ye, old friend? Sweet Patience awaits yonder, thy brothers Aaron and Baptiste beside her. All three shall I gift, in exchange for one. The fairest price, no? Thy true daughter for she who simply wishes to be?* '

"My brother's only reply was a gleaming rope of saliva, spat out into the wind. I touched his thoughts then, and before he slammed the door and fixed me with his glower, I saw that jewel, that miracle, that little girl in his mind. Her papa's eyes and her mama's skin, her name inked in silver across his knuckles.

"*He had her,* we realized. *Voss had Patience in his claws*.

"And still, Gabriel refused to abandon Dior.

"*God, how dear he loved her …*

"Fabién's gaze drifted back to Duke de La Fontaine.

"'*Consider my offer, Chevalier. One girl be a small price for an empire.*'

"And without a whisper, the light in those skulls about him went out.

"Darkness crashed down where once he'd stood, so heavy and thick we almost heard the clap. Thunder rolled, heavens colliding above, our gaze fixed on Gabriel.

"'Brother…'

"'You don't get to call me that. Not anymore.'

"We clenched our jaw at his slap, knowing we deserved it. 'So be it. But if you wish me to look in upon Patience, or pass word to her or your brothers…'

"We lifted our hand, a tiny moth of blood upon our fingertip.

"'Godssakes, she is my *niece*. If we can help…'

"It took an age, the mistrust within him plain for any to see. But finally, Gabriel nodded, eyes like ice, voice barely a whisper.

"'If you could look in on them … I'd be obliged.'

"We nodded, and at our command, that mote fluttered into the air, struggling against those howling winds. Duke Maarten's eyes were on Dior, the Grail still stood upon those walls and glowering into the dark. Turning to his aide-de-camp—a short, blotch-faced capitaine with a long moustache—Maarten nodded.

"'Give the call to arms. Make ready the walls.'

"'Ready the walls!' the little man bellowed. '*REAAAADY!* '

"The cry was repeated down the ramparts, thousands of blades unsheathed, thousands of arrows nocked. We could hear movement now, rising from a whisper out in that ink-black night; the thunder of oncoming feet. But still, even with the eyes of the Dead, we could see *nothing*. The Duke bellowed for light, *Godssakes, light!* and a thousand hempcloth arrows were fired, lit at flickering braziers and arcing out into the black like dying suns. And as they fell, down, *down* into the brink before Augustin's walls, finally, we saw what was coming for us, Marquis."

"Puppies?" Jean-François asked.

The Last Silversaint scoffed, throwing a fond smile to the historian.

"Vampires," Celene replied, undeterred. "Tens of thousands. I had fought at the Battle of Maergenn, where Voss and Dyvok crashed against us like waves of bloody red. At Lastbridge, where Dior turned back their tide. But I had never before *seen* the Endless Legion in its entirety, Jean-François. Not arrayed in full strength as it was that night."

Celene shook her head and sighed.

"Such a number. Clad in finery and rags and armor rent, run through with rot or almost whole, pale and bloodless and endless, sweet *Mothermaid,* I swear God we did not know the meaning of that word until that moment. Cadres of mortal soldiers came behind them, armor wrought with bone motifs and the ravens of their dread master. But the men marched slower, the Black Crow and his highbloods too, leaving the onslaught to the wretched. They charged heedless at our walls, those Dead things, and in the final flicker before those burning arrows were extinguished, I beheld an empire's ruin."

"Very poetic. One might even say *theatrical.*"

The historian dipped his quill, glancing now to the silversaint.

"But melodrama aside, was it truly bad as all that?"

"It was bad," Gabriel replied. "Maybe not *Tell My Wife I Love Her* bad, but definitely *New Pair of Britches* bad. I've told you before war is mostly numbers—children's tales and taverne songs aside. You can only swing your sword so many times before your arm turns to lead. You can only loose so many arrows before your bowstring breaks. And though in numbers, we had Fabién's match, a single wretched is worth a dozen mortal men. And as that fucking snake coiled across the river just noted, Voss had *thousands* of them."

Celene scoffed softly, but glancing to the torchbearers, made no reply.

"But we had walls," Gabriel continued. "Wheellocks. Holy water. Cannon.

Flame. And the drymoat before the battlements of Rive Nord was twenty feet deep and wide, brimming with sharpened stakes and doused with every pint of lamp oil left in Augustin. Voss had no siege engines—he'd need to send his wretched across to scale the walls. That's a *big* ask with the drymoat on fire and four thousand archers and riflemen peppering your arsehole.

"Maarten was no twat, like I say—he'd fought the Dead in the past, and earned his knighthood with blood. He held our archers ready, waiting for the moment Voss would send his first wave of wretched into the moat. With luck, a few thousand would be ashes before they even reached the walls."

The silversaint steepled silvered fingers at his lips and scowled.

"Unfortunately, when I say war is *mostly* numbers, that still leaves a remainder. *Tactics*. *Leadership*. *Luck*. In all that, Voss had our measure. And despite the knighthood he'd earned, Maarten now faced an enemy that could pluck his every thought from his mind.

"The wretched came on—that snarling, seething flood. But a couple of hundred feet out from the moat, they just stopped dead. It was … uncanny, coldblood. There were tens of thousands of the bastards, and every *one* just froze, as if at the snap of a single finger.

"And out in the dark, I heard a cold voice cry.

"*'Loose! '*

"Flames flared—hundreds all at once. My heart sank as I saw a volley of burning arrows sailing out from the night toward *us,* sent by Voss's faithful thralls. Maarten called all to 'Ware!' and Joaquin and the Unbound dragged Dior back from the battlements. Yet it wasn't toward our walls those shots were loosed, but the drymoat beneath.

"The arrows struck, our lamp oil caught fire, a shocking flare of heat and light. The conflagration sped across the moat, scorching, roaring—anything in that firestorm living or Dead would've been ashes. But not a single wretched had tried to cross.

"Voss had seen our first strike coming from miles away.

"'Sweet Mothermaid,' Maarten breathed.

"The flames were so bright, they lit up that dark again. And as the fire raged, the Endless Legion stood motionless, just out of bow and rifle range. Smoke rose, choking and thick, and hopes across the walls sank. I met Maarten's eyes, rebuke behind my teeth. I'd *warned* him to close off his thoughts, and like a boy on his maiden trip to the bush, he'd emptied his first quiver before the doe was even damp.

"'Get ready,' I warned. 'This is going to get every shade of bloody.'

"The fires dimmed, Dead eyes staring hungry at the walls. And when the last of those flames failed, our opening gambit with them, the Endless Legion charged."

Gabriel paused, silence ringing as his voice fell still. All in the room were on edge now, the tale of coming battle gripping thrall and vampire alike. But heedless, the silversaint had busied himself with his sacrament, lips pursed as he filled his pipe.

Hands shaking.

Pupils dilating.

And to fill the gulf, his sister spoke.

"Those first thirty minutes were awful, Historian. Phoebe and my brother stood side by side as that sea of Dead meat came on, her hand brushing light against his. Dior stood behind me, watching with wide blue eyes. There were firearms among the Unbound. Gabriel had armed himself with three wheellocks loaded with silvershot, and a bandolier of silverbombs about his chest. But it seemed a waste to squander any of that on Voss's chaff. So as those foulbloods poured across the smoking drymoat and began climbing through the cover of rising smoke, there was very little for us to actually *do*.

"The first wave shattered on the walls, repelled by Augustin's archers and riflemen, the bone-shaking roar of cannon loaded with silvershot. Battlepriests emptied barrels of holy water over the ramparts, Dead flesh melting off blackened bone. But as arrows flew and rifles cracked and rotten bodies piled up in the moat below, they served only as stepping stones upon which their fellow wretched continued to climb. The onslaught was relentless, clawing and seething, climbing higher, ever higher.

"Endless.

"'We're going to lose this wall,' my brother warned. 'Fight hard as you're able, but listen for my voice. When I give the signal, we fall *back*.'

"'Bring the wounded,' Phoebe growled. 'Dior can set them right when we've a breather. None left behind, y'hear?'

"Jaw clenched, we sliced our palms, summoning our blade and flail of blood. Beside us, young Joaquin Marenn roared, raising his silvered axe high.

"'For the Grail, brothers!'

"And down the walls came the cry, 'FOR THE GRAIL!'

"Dior lifted her chin, buoyed up by their valor, their faith unwavering. She met each man's eye, brimming with boundless love, for them, this city, this world. But most, we think, for the girl she'd lost. We recalled the conversation she and Reyne had in her room, about that day that never comes. About how it was worth fighting for anyway. And tears in her eyes, raising a silvered dagger already wet with her blood, she cried aloud.

"'For tomorrow!'

"And like the raindrop that heralds the flood, the first wretched came over the wall."

X

MORE RED THAN GREY

“SLAUGHTER.”

The Last Liathe sat on oily stone, staring into dark water.

“I have read tales that chilled my blood to ice, or made it rush like molten gold. I have listened to poetry so beautiful it left me weeping. Looked back across time through the histories of folk long dead and known those days as if I lived them. Words are an elixir, Marquis. Perhaps the only true magik left in this misbegotten world. We find meaning in them. Purpose. Joy and sorrow and solace.”

She hung her head, staring at empty hands.

“But they are such weak and woeful things, sometimes. And while words like *butchery* and *massacre* might paint the vaguest picture, they cannot hope to encompass the horrors we saw on the walls of Rive Nord that night. The shriek of steel and screams. The stench of blood and bowel. It lasted hours, that carnage. Hours that felt like years. The stones were so slick with blood by the end, it spilled in *waterfalls* off the ramparts. The bodies piled so high one could almost climb them up to heaven and escape this hell. The air was filled with wailing cries, shouted prayers, bubbling whispers for God or wives or mothers. Snow more red than grey.

“And still they came.

“As we fought, side by side with some young Callum against that endless tide, we began to see our brother’s dreadful enemy at work. The cruelty of simple *math*. The Dead were stronger. Fearless. Tireless. Remorseless. And the ones who stood against them were only men. Brave, oui. Bold, true.

"But just men.

"We lost thousands. Good soldiers and archers and battlepriests all, who fought and died for a *wall,* of all things. But just as Gabriel promised, we lost it, breakthroughs cracking the battlements and spreading like a bloodstain on silk.

"'Back now!' he roared. 'Fall *back*!'

"And so we did, elbow-deep in blood, our red blade cutting Dead flesh like smoke. Unbound spilled from the highwalk at Gabriel's command, he and Phoebe fighting to cover their flight, Dior dragging the wounded with her. We found ourselves alongside the fleshwitch, cleaving and weaving among the foe. I reached out to her mind, trying to move in symphony with her as we'd done with Reyne at the Battle of Lastbridge. But Phoebe snarled at me to get the hell out of her head, and unable to blame her, we retreated.

"The Golden Host did likewise, Duke Maarten bellowing for the withdrawal. Men fled down the highwalk stairs to the ringing of horns, dozens pushed off by the panicked fellows behind, crunching to the flagstones below. Blood turned snow to sludge, archers and riflemen pouring on shot to cover the escape. Even as I say the word, I feel how completely it fails to convey the experience. But the only one I can find is *chaos*.

"Utter chaos."

"And where were your eyes during all this?" Jean-François asked.

"Still blind," Celene replied. "That dark was deep, and that storm was hungry, and our mote was still struggling through it. But though the battle had raged for hours, our wings almost frozen solid, still we'd not found the place Voss kept camp."

The historian dipped his quill, glancing to Gabriel.

"So. The first hand had been won by the Ironhearts. What of the second?"

"Wasn't so much a hand of cards."

The silversaint finished his pipe, exhaled a plume of crimson.

"More a game of chess."

Jean-François turned a new page and raised one expectant brow.

"A rout is a dangerous thing, Historian," Gabriel said, coughing red. "You're never more at risk than when your back is to your enemy. But with the Golden Host in full retreat, the legion didn't press. Instead, the foulbloods broke down the gates to let Ettiene and the other highbloods inside, and *they* lowered the drawbridge for Voss's thrallswords to march across. The road to Rive Cœur was officially open.

"But, in the time that all took, we'd pulled back to riverside, joining up with the reserve force there. Lastbridge loomed at our backs—a broad span of stone arching over the frozen Béni, toward the Cœur's walls. I could see men up on those ramparts, thousands, looking down on us with nothing close to envy. Our battlements were packed with troops, bloodied and weary.

But the miraculous victory Dior had won the last time she fought here was on the mind of every soldier, and spirits were still high. Except of course for mine.

"'We should pull back,' I hissed. 'Retreat over the bridge, they'll be—'

"'I do not remember asking your advice, de León,' Maarten growled.

"'Consider it a gift freely given, Fontaine.'

"'And worth every coin, I am sure.'

"We were stood in one of the gatehouse towers, a map of Rive Nord laid on a table before us. Maarten's staff were a blur of motion and shouted orders, men forming up as best they were able on the ramparts outside. I'd no wish to upstage the Duke's command—I'd come in private with my concerns, and kept my voice low. But you could count the fucks Maarten gave for my opinion on no hands.

"'Why spend men here?' I demanded. 'The Cœur has better fortifications *and* guns. If we blow the bridge—'

"'They simply stroll across the river! It's frozen solid, man!'

"'They'll be forced to scale the walls! A hundred feet or more, under fire the—'

"'I was charged by my Empress to defend these shores, and so I shall!' Maarten was nose-to-nose with me now, spit on his lips and 'tache. 'A vow may mean nothing to you, de León, but *my* word is my bond. This is not my first time fighting the Dead, and I am *not* without a plan to win this night! Now keep your godless mouth shut and your leech's eyes open, and you may learn a thing or two!'

"'Well, unless you want Voss to learn it too, I'd stay out of sight this time, pigdick. In case you missed the missive, your enemy can read your fucking *mind*!'

"'Get this honorless dog out of here!'

"I raised my hands to his guards, already backing out of the room. As I departed, Maarten turned to his second, a short, mustachioed wanker named Deveraux.

"'Be ready. On my signal, Lieutenant.'

"Back out on the walls, I met up with Dior and Phoebe. The fighting had been brutal, but we'd lost only half a dozen Unbound, our wounded healed by Dior's holy blood. Yet the mood among the men was still grim—I could see those comrades of the Cup cared for each other in a way that put most other soldiers to shame.

"'What did Duke Fuckweasel say?' Joaquin asked.

"'Don't call him that,' I growled.

"'Why not? I've met some pricks in my time, but he's the whole bloody hedgehog.'

"'Show some respect. He's a Sword of the Realm, boy.'

"'Seems they'll give knighthoods to anyone these days, Chevalier.'

"Joaquin smirked, and I looked him over, unsmiling. He was bloodied to the elbows, mail rent by Dead claws, but he stood tall, just as I'd seen him do at the battle of Dún Maergenn. He was Nordish born like me, dark of hair and eye. And he had some cheek.

"I'll admit, I was starting to like the little bastard.

"'We defend here,' I said. 'Fuckweasel's orders.'

"Staring out across the city, into the depths of that storm-struck dark, we could see movement now—the first of the Dead come to gaze upon the secondary defenses. But at Maarten's signal, a horn rang across the ramparts, and moments later, a dull *WHUMP* rang through the night. More followed, dozens of them, flames now flaring in the streets of Rive Nord and spreading quick, the stink of woodsmoke and burning oil kissing the wind.

"'We're setting fire to our own city now?'

"I glanced to Dior beside me, the rising flames reflected on her eyes.

"'He's hemming them in, so their numbers count for less.' I glanced toward the command tower, gave a grudging nod. 'Not bad thinking, Fuckweasel.'

"We could see them now, illuminated by those rising flames, coming quick. Foulbloods in the vanguard, thralls and highbloods in the rear. With fires springing up east and west across the Nord, their approach was narrowed, most spilling down the two main thoroughfares toward Place San Antoine. But hemmed that tight, we could see the numbers we faced, and as Celene said, *Endless* didn't quite cover it.

"'Where the hells is that she-devil with the scythe?'

"Phoebe's eyes were narrowed, searching the foe. She was right—I could see dozens of Voss's knights, and I'd caught a glimpse of Ettiene. But of the Iron Maiden …

"'Maybe she's at the back of the line with Voss,' Dior offered. 'As a great poet once said, there's nobody who fears dying more than things that live forever.'

"I smiled faintly, looking sidelong at Celene. 'Have you found them? Is Kestrel…'

"'Not yet. The storm blowsss fierce, and the dark is deep.'

"I nodded, gaze returning to the oncoming Dead. The walls we stood weren't the finest—this was the Nord's soft underbelly. I knew we'd be in for a hell of a fight, and we'd likely be pushed back across Lastbridge at its end. But I heard a clamor then; the whinny of horses and creak of barding and tack. Looking behind, I saw a great cadre of men and horse sallying over the bridge toward our gatehouse. They were clad in plate, tabards of blue stitched with the falcons of Fontaine—the cavaliers Maarten brought from Daggercoast.

"'They're going to fucking *charge*?' I whispered, bewildered.

"'Be ready.' A sergeant in Augustin colors was creeping down the line now, murmuring. ‘Stay out of sight behind the battlements. Make no move until the signal.’

“‘We’re going to leave the walls we just retreated to?’ Joaquin asked, incredulous. ‘I thought fighting on them was the bloody *point* of them?’

“‘Just stay the hell down,’ I growled. ‘They can’t see you, they can’t read you.’

“The Unbound obeyed, every man and priest along the walls hunkering behind the ramparts. But Dior stayed standing, gazing into the night. I heard the cavaliers forming up below, words of encouragement from the capitaines, calls of ‘*For the Empress!* ’ and ‘*For the Grail!* ’ And with another horn blast, the portcullis to Lastbridge was raised, and the cavaliers of Daggercoast charged forth.

“Their hooves were thunder, three thousand horses and riders shaking the very ground. Risking a quick peek, I saw the Dead moving like a great flock of swallows, their minds linked by Ettiene and that web of highbloods. Their center was holding, their flanks spilling through and across the empty buildings—a pincer, set to encircle the cavalry and swallow them whole. I cursed Maarten for a fucking fool then, throwing away three thousand men and horse, and for what? But a cry rang out, the order to ‘*Loose!* ’ followed by the hymn of bowstrings. Looking up, I saw hundreds of flaming arrows sailing out from our walls. But the trajectory was odd, and at first I’d no clue what they were shooting at.”

Gabriel cracked his knuckles, leaning back in his chair.

“Then the first warehouse exploded.”

Jean-François blinked. “Exploded?”

“I’d wondered why we were fighting for a city that had been abandoned by its people, but now I understood—you can destroy it with impunity. Maarten had set his fires to funnel the Dead into the thoroughfares, sent his cavalry down the guts to draw Voss’s pincers into the surrounding buildings. And that’s where he’d stashed it all.”

“The black ignis,” Jean-François realized, snapping his fingers. “The explosives that had once been set to destroy Lastbridge. You’d wondered where they were.”

“He was a twat, Maarten, but he didn’t lack creativity. Four buildings packed with black ignis and lamp oil went up like fireworks on a feastday, the firestorm rushing through streets tight-packed with Dead. The men atop our walls roared as hundreds of wretched were scorched to ash in a blinking, and as the clamor died, horns split the night, Maarten standing upon the ramparts with mace raised.

“‘For the Empress, boys! CHAAAAARGE!’

“Fervor and fury, eyes alight with bloodlust and dreams of vengeance, the soldiers of Augustin spilled back out from the Lastbridge gatehouse toward Place San Antoine, their rout become a rally. The cavaliers struck, splintering the wretched line and plowing into the thralls behind, horses screaming, bones crunching, limbs flying. Fires raged unchecked, pushing back that darkness and Voss's legion with it. The Unbound looked to Dior for orders, eager to join the fray. But the Grail stood atop the battlements, turning now to me.

"I met her eyes, nodding to words unspoken.

"'Something's *wrong,*' I said.

"Horns were ringing on the walls of Rive Cœur now, the gates at our backs yawning wide. More cavalry were riding across Lastbridge, infantry behind—Prince Philippe was committing thousands more men to Maarten's push. They flooded through the gateway below, into the square beyond, and for a moment, it seemed the bait and switch had worked. Voss's 'swords were in disarray, their line smashed by heavy horse. The Black Crow and his fellows fought like hell, but the second charge was closing, footmen and rifles to back them, foulbloods fleeing burning streets only to be cut down into melting snow.

"Hunter had become hunted. Predator, prey."

The Last Silversaint lifted his goblet, draining it to the last. His eye was shot through with red, his pain forgot, voice quickened by smoke and blood.

"You remember my chess lesson from Cairnhaem? The Rousseau Gambit?"

"Of course. Draw your foes out of position by feigning weakness. Then, strike.'

Gabriel smiled. "Maybe my wisdom hasn't been totally wasted on you, vampire."

"Oh, *God,* get your hand out of your pants, de León. And get *on* with it."

The silversaint looked the vampire over carefully, drunken smile darkening. "Did I hurt your feelings, Jean-François? When I got my hand in *your* pants? Did I injure your pride or bollocks worse when I burned them off? Because your taddysack will grow back, vampire. But the men and women and children butchered in Augustin that night are gone forever."

"You almost killed me," the historian hissed.

"But I didn't. I *spared* you. And while you're figuring out why, my advice meantime would be for you to build a bridge, coldblood. Then march right the fuck over it."

Jean-François scowled, eyes narrowed in thought.

"… Like Philippe's soldiers into Voss's trap?"

"Masterful segue." Gabriel raised his glass in toast. "See, that's the spirit."

"The Prince had ordered more men into the Nord," Jean-François said. "Denuding his own defenses to reinforce Maarten's charge. Believing a tactician as masterful as the Forever King—a creature who conquered a *continent*—might be bested by a few barrels of black ignis and a spark."

"The clever lion feigns weakness to draw out his prey," Gabriel replied. "But I wonder, has any wisdom *truly* rubbed off on you, vampire? Why didn't

Voss just crush us during our rout? Why let us regroup? What do you think came next?”

“… Voss’s true attack.”

Jean-François tilted his head and smiled.

“This whole *battle* had been a feint.”

“There might be hope for you yet, Jean-François.”

The historian dipped his quill, watching the silversaint’s brow darken.

“Twenty thousand men had been stationed in Rive Nord,” Gabriel said. “Another ten in reserve. And Philippe had committed another fifteen to the rally; footmen, rifles, and knights now pouring into Place San Antoine, rather than defending the higher, *better* walls of the Cœur. The square was bedlam, all order and form lost. Fires blazed across the ruins, the air thick with smoke, ash, gore. Most eyes were on the battle raging in the Nord’s streets, Maarten stood upon the walls with his commanders, smiling faces lit by the light of the flames and their impending triumph.

“Most eyes, save Dior’s and mine.

“‘Ye aright, Gabe?’ Phoebe murmured.

“I made no reply, turning from the Battle of the Nord—the battle he *wanted* us to be watching—out to the river behind. The night was blacker than pitch, snow falling so thick it was almost fog. The Béni was a grey sheet covered in snow, a frozen ribbon running east and west along the Cœur’s bristling walls.

“Squinting eastward I saw nothing. But turning west, pawing that accursed frost from my eyes and looking over the broken jetties of Portside behind us, my heart skipped two beats. In the black, I saw movement now; figures, a few at first, but then a dozen, a hundred, more and more now coalescing out of that darkness. And as I roared warning to Maarten, I realized the depths of the shite we swam in.

“This wasn’t just some diversionary force come to harry our rear. This was an entire other *army*. Voss must’ve kept them in reserve during his summer attack, summoning them once we set out for Augustin. I’d wondered why he’d felt so weak at Maximille, and *here* was the reason. He’d played us all for fools. And now the other half of the Endless Legion was rushing up Portside and into our exposed flank, set to rip us a whole new arsehole.

“Maarten pushed through the throng, stood now at my side.

“‘Sweet and holy Mothermaid…’

“‘*Far* from her.’

“She stared up at me from the river with eyes dark as night. Bloody skull daubed on her face, lips curled in a hollow smile as she raised her scythe in salute toward the Grail. And Dior spoke then, her voice so soft that the tempest near swallowed it whole.

“‘Kestrel.’”

XI

HURT FEELINGS

"'RETREAT!'

"That was the roar spilling from Maarten's lips, spittle frozen in his beard. His commanders were scrambling, bells ringing across the walls of the Cœur as cold, hard reality sank home. We'd been outplayed, overcommitting in the Nord and leaving our backs exposed. And now pants were *firmly* about ankles. Thousands of troops were crowded onto Lastbridge, bewildered as those bells sang, wondering whether to advance or turn back. More men were streaming into Place San Antoine, pausing in their charge, the soldiers already in the thick of it roaring at their fellows to get the hell into the fight."

Gabriel shook his head, jaw clenched.

"Shitshow at the fuck festival."

"How could Maarten have been so thoroughly outmaneuvered?" Jean-François asked. "I thought he was a renowned general?"

"Hubris. Puffed up by a few easy wins in a few easy battles. But it was more than that. Simpler, even. We were sightless in that storm. There's a reason mortal armies don't fight in winter, coldblood. A *better* reason why we don't fight at night.

"I was pissed at Maarten before, but I'd managed to keep it in my pants. I was no ranking officer—I'd no place giving orders on that wall. But as Maarten bellowed for the retreat, as I watched confusion spreading among his men, the fear that follows, well, I finally lost my bottle. I'd *been* one of those boys down in the blood and the shit. Looking to the men who commanded me for leadership, knowing their wisdom was the difference between living and dying. And this man was *failing* the men who followed him.

"'You want them to turn around?' I demanded, pointing to the thousands of men and horses now bottlenecking the bridge. 'They're halfway across, use your fucking head!'

"'Get out of my way, oathbreaker!'

"But I grabbed Maarten's tabard, cloth tearing as I dragged him close. 'What about the men aready in the square? You're going to leave them?'

"'We're outflanked! We fall back to the Cœur and—'

"'It's too late for that! We're balls-deep here, the only way through is to fuck our way out!'

"'Get off me!' he spat, tearing free of my grip. 'I am a general of the Golden Host! And you are a drunken, halfblooded dog! Lay hand on me again, I'll see you hanged f—'

"My punch splintered his teeth, cut his lips to ribbons. Knocked cold, Maarten collapsed into the arms of his second. Deveraux looked at me, mouth flapping, but I was already climbing the ramparts, roaring at the top of my lungs to the chaos below.

"'Cavaliers on the bridge, form up at the gate, ready to charge on my order! Infantry and archers, get your arses up to these walls! We head into the plaza, bring those men back, then stand or fall here! Move, curse you, *MOVE*!'

"The bells were yet ringing, horns yet blowing, seeds of discord putting down roots. But for all the confusion, the chaos and fear, every soldier in that army yet knew my name.

"And when the Black Lion of Lorson roared, they listened.

"I turned to a nearby signalman, a lad with pale fuzz on his lip and wide blue eyes.

"'Tell the Cœur cannon to open up and keep firing! Every fucking barrel!'

"'If they keep firing at the Dead, soon enough they'll be hitting *us*!'

"'Better blown apart than swallowed whole, *do it,* boy!'

"The lad raised his flags, signaling to the Cœur ramparts. Across the river, there were at least a hundred heavy guns that could be brought to bear on our wall, and the price we'd pay would be bloody. Kestrel's Dead were already spilling into Portside, and soon they'd be at our throats. But I knew at least if we died by cannon fire, there was no chance we'd rise to be used against the living who remained. Because the truth was plain now, shining in Dior's eyes, on the faces of her Unbound, in Phoebe's gaze as she touched my arm.

"Every man and woman our side of the river was about to die.

"'I still don't love ye, Gabriel de León.'

"'I don't love you, too.' I shook my head and smiled sadly. 'But if I were a decent man, I'd have married you, Phoebe á Dúnnsair.'

"She grinned as she offered her wrist. 'Who ever said I wanted a decent man?'

"The cannon opened up, the first volleys of silvershot tearing through Kestrel's legion. As the walls trembled beneath us, I pushed aside the hand Phoebe offered and kissed her. No words needed to be spoken, no troth pledged; we were never a pair for promises nor vows. But I hoped she knew—body melting into mine as our lips met in that firestorm—what she'd come to mean. I'd no time to linger, mouth drifting to her throat now, fangs pressed to that pulsing vein, that maddening thunder of life beneath her skin. And into that flood I plunged, the fire of *her* flooding into me, that power of ancient throne and blighted blood, setting all my sky afire and the beast within me roaring.

"*More,* it bellowed.

"*ALL.*

"I dragged my mouth away with a gasp, Phoebe pressing a hand to her throat and breathing hard. She squeezed my fingers, nodding as I turned to Dior.

"'Cleave to my side like my fucking shadow,' I growled. 'You move when I move, stay when I stay, and more and most, you do what I *say*.'

"'Oui, Papa.'

"The cavalry had formed up outside the gates now, infantry and archers flooding up onto our walls, cannon singing, boom, *boom, BOOM*. I led Dior and the Unbound down to the cobbles, young cavaliers looking to me, horses stomping, steaming. Valentino's silversteel sword was drenched in my hand, the promise etched down the blade gleaming in the light of those flames. *Fear is but the cradle of valor.* But despite how well the blade had served me, I reached for another hilt then. The sword Dior had returned to me in the feasting hall, the friend I loved so dear and had hurt so deep, still hung at my belt.

"I drew Ashdrinker into the night, turning to the soldiers at my back. Their eyes widened at the sight; the sword of an angel, in the hand of a legend.

"'Let's get our boys back!'

"Boots dug in, horses charged, thunder on the stone. The square was chaos; riders and thralls and knights and wretched and archers and highbloods, a pocket of living men now fighting a sea of Dead. Ettiene and his highbloods were cutting through soldiers like smoke. But as I ran behind the charge, a stuttering silver song rang in my head.

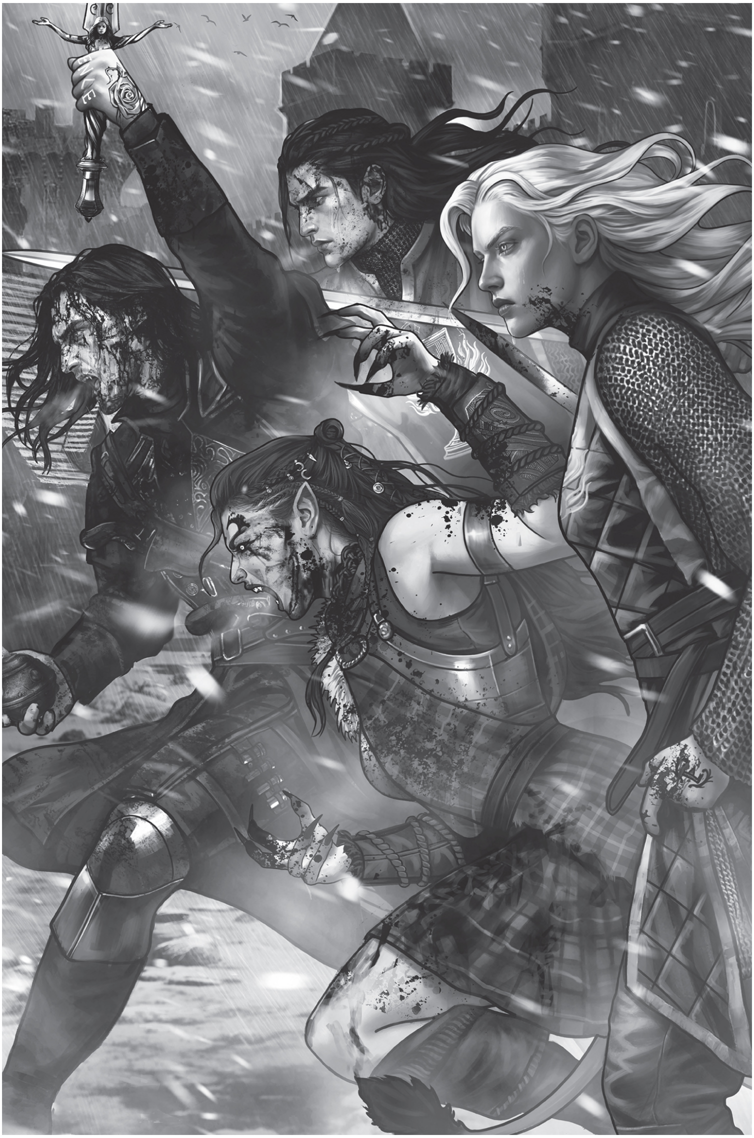
"*Live esh'nadai d-d-d-dov nem dadadada.*

"'Ash…'

"*Four tablespspspspoons of b-b-buhbuhbutter …*

“‘Is that you?’

“*Me they I? We us wh-whowho?*



“I cut down a handful of wretched with her, tears in my eyes. But I soon realized just how broken my friend was. We’d started this road together, and I’d promised we’d finish likesame. But a cracked sword would be little use against a Prince of Forever, and any blow might split Ashdrinker through the hilt, ending her song completely. So soon enough, and much as it pained me, I slipped her back into her scabbard, silencing her shattered hymn.

“The cavalry crashed into the Dead encircling our boys, splitting them asunder. As the cavaliers went to work, hacking a path toward our surrounded troops, shots cracked off the stones around us. A half dozen Unbound fell, arrows hissing through the air—thrallswords had taken up position in the surrounding buildings, letting loose from on high.

“‘Celene, get those—’

“‘I ssssee them!’ she cried, bursting apart and flooding up into the night.

“Dior set to work as we fought, cutting her palm and bringing her wounded back from the brink. I could see her desire to *fight,* to bleed as her soldiers did. But she was never one to seek glory, and saving the dying was a greater gift than sending more men to hell.

“I’d no such talents, good for little more than slaughter. And so I did, cutting down the wretched flooding over bloody cobbles. A path had been sliced now, that pocket of gold-and-blue tabards able to pull back, and I roared for the retreat, heart pounding in my chest, the strength of the Moonsthrone in my veins and my beautiful huntress by my side.

“I saw him then, through the tumbling snows, spattered with red. He’d torn off his greathelm to feed on those he slew, beard dripping with gore. Black eyes were alight with bloodlust and rage, the battle between us far from finished.

“*‘COME, DE LEÓN! ’* Ettiene roared. ‘*LET ME DELIVER THEE TO THY BRIDE! ’*

“‘Fall *back*!’ I cried. ‘Back to the gates!’

“The men obeyed, soldiers and horses streaming past us as we covered their backs, ankle-deep in red. The Black Crow came on, eyes fixed on me as he rent flesh and bone with great sweeps of that terrible maul. Through the smoke and tumbling snows, I could hear cannon pounding at my back, stone shattering, men screaming. The guns of the Cœur were pounding Kestrel’s foulbloods as they flooded up the banks at our rear, but the Dead had hit the Nord’s riverwalls now, spilling over the ramparts we were fleeing back toward, even as they were blasted apart by cannon. Death in front. Death behind.”

“Precarious indeed,” Jean-François mused, turning the page.

“No, you misunderstand. We were *fucked,* coldblood. Thousands of Dead at our throats. More at our backs. Both legions led by Princes of Forever. We were retreating to a position already near overrun, under fire from our own fucking guns. Morale was shattering along with the battlements, men fleeing over Lastbridge, back toward the gates of the Cœur. But they’d been sealed as soon as Kestrel arrived. There was nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. Nothing to do but fight and die.”

“But you didn’t,” the historian pointed out. “You *didn’t* die, de León.”

“No.” The Last Silversaint sighed, gaze downturned. “This has never been a story about whether I won or lost, Historian. It's about the *price* I paid for the lie of victory."

Jean-François saw a hint of bloody tears, pawed away swift on tattooed knuckles.

"And where were you in all this, Mlle Castia?"

"On the rooftops," she replied. "Cutting down archers and riflemen. It was bloody work, but the Voss thralls had not been armed to fight the Dead. Yet the fires were spreading now, fed by storm winds, black clouds aglow with the light of burning warehouses. As Gabriel and his men retreated toward the crumbling battlements on the riverbank, I fled across the rooftops, burning embers falling amid whirling snows.

"The voices in me had quieted since Maryn's death, but I could still sense their fear; a chorus of dreadful whispers adding to my own. I could see how hopeless Gabriel's position was. The Black Crow was carving his way toward my brother's back, the Iron Maiden cutting into those ramparts, *laughing* as the snows ran red. Men were pounding on the Cœur gates, begging to be let in as their fellows were slaughtered. But the defenders dared not risk their city by opening the way, preferring to leave the soldiers outside to die.

"Dior and Gabriel must surely follow.

"As the Dead flooded toward my friends, ma famille, I set eyes upon the Cœur gates. The towers about it. But do not forget; I had other eyes in that storm, Historian. Tiny eyes of red that had long roamed the windswept dark in search of the Forever King.

"And at last, they had *found* him.

"My mote was near frozen, battling those terrible gales. But looking through tiny red eyes, I saw it now, beyond the walls; a tent on a bluff west of Rive Nord. It was surrounded by wretched and miserable thrallswords, shivering in the squalls. But within, I saw flickering light. And toward that tent my mote sped, while Augustin burned around me.

"Beneath the flap I finally crawled, lest those within sense me. The tent was palatial in size, coal-fired braziers staving off the chill outside, but doing little to banish it within. I felt it grip my tiny body, near finishing the job the storm had begun.

"A chill that froze not only flesh, but *soul*.

"At the head of a long table he sat, clad in white brocade and wreathed in the echoes of uncounted murders. Maker of our maker. First of the Five. Brother of God's own son and architect not only of the death of empire, but the death of days.

"The Forever King sat with alabaster hands on the oaken table, black eyes upturned. He was surrounded by some dozen highbloods of his brood, clad as courtiers in silks and velvet. Among them was one of your ilk, Marquis—a shapely blond femme sipping a goblet of blood and clutching a terrified little hound to her breast."

“Nicolette,” Jean-François mused. “Never one to get her hands dirty, is she?”

“At Voss’s right sat a vampire of terrible beauty. Marble flesh, and crimson claws. The lace of her gown was near translucent, leaving little to imagination’s realm. Chocolat curls cascaded over a stole of grey fox fur and the bare shoulders beneath. We knew this was Morgane, Fifth Prince of Forever, murderess of countless thousands. Across from her sat my brother’s brothers—Aaron de Coste, clad in silent fear and a greatcoat of midnight blue, and his beloved Baptiste, shivering in that terrible cold. We realized he was the only living man in that tent. And sat upon Morgane’s lap, sketching on sheafs of parchment with charcoal sticks, sat a porcelain angel.

“I could see my brother in her face. In her eyes.

“My niece.

“*‘Patience…’*

“Her name spilled from my lips, and I opened our true eyes once more. Back on the rooftops of Rive Nord I was, looking across the rising flames and churning smoke toward Lastbridge. I could yet see the terrible danger Dior and Gabriel were in. And though we now knew where Fabién waited, more pressing was the battle here and now.

“And calling to my brother, I burst apart at my seams.”

“I heard Celene shout,” the silversaint said. “But not what she’d said. We’d backed up to the riverbank walls, Phoebe and the Unbound and I fighting beneath the gateway arch where the Dead’s numbers would weigh less. Cannons barked, stone splintered, death cries ringing in the air. The bridge behind us was *packed* with men now, wretched pouring up over the railings from the ice fifty feet below. Though the soldiers pounded upon the portcullis and roared for aid, the Cœur gates were still sealed—there was no way the defenders were going to open those doors and risk the Dead getting inside.

“We’d nowhere left to run.

“The strength of the Moonsthrone had turned me into a foe few could match, but one of those few had found me now. Ettiene was stalking toward me, smashing wretched aside in his haste to reach my throat. I’d almost bested him when last we fought, and the Black Crow was keen to even the scales. The memory of him standing in the dark outside my home as his father came knocking burned bright in my mind. But brighter still burned the fear of him getting his claws on the girl I’d vowed to defend with my life.

“‘Get back, Dior!’

“‘No, just let me—’

“‘No heroics! No bullshit, get the *fuck* behind me!’

“I pushed, shoving her back with Joaquin. She grabbed my wrist, eyes on mine, screaming above the slaughtersong, ‘Will you calm your *bloody* tits, de León?’

"Grabbing hold of Valor, Dior closed her fingers and drew her hand up the blade, slicing her flesh to the bone and drenching the silversteel in her blood.

"'Now *kill* that fucking whoreson!'

"Phoebe grinned, set to dive into battle beside me. But from the shattering ramparts above, a shadow plummeted earthward beside the Crow, splintering the flagstones as she landed. Dark plate, death's-head, weapon gleaming bloody in her hands. With a twist, she parted the haft, sliding her longblade from her scythe's heart.

"*'We meet again, child.'*

"Kestrel leveled her scythe at Dior and smiled.

"*'There be no dusk to save thee now.'*

"'Oh shit…' Dior whispered.

"The two Princes advanced, the Unbound raising their blades, but with a curse, I tore off my bandolier and wheellock pistols, shoved them at Joaquin.

"'Protect Dior, boy. Promise me.'

"'I swear it, Chevalier.'

"I nodded and pushed him away, shouting to his fellows.

"'All of you, back to the gates! Protect the Grail! This is no battle for mortal men!'

"Ettiene laughed then, fangs glinting in his blood-soaked beard.

"*'Thou art a man also, de León. As mortal as the rest of them.'*

"Eyes on his, I kissed the silver ring my mama had given me so many years ago.

"'I'm no man, bastard. I'm a *lion*.'

"I met Ettiene's charge, slipping aside his strike and hewing at his spine. Valor was anointed with the same blood setting fire to those foulbloods behind me, and one strike to the Crow's flesh could end him. Problem being, that flesh was clad in metal, and testing silversteel against fieldplate would probably just leave me with a bent sword. The only part of Ettiene exposed was his head. So, headshots it was.

"Phoebe darted toward Kestrel, black talons agleam. Those claws could rend steel, and Voss flesh too—God knows I'd scars enough to bear witness. But though I'd been schooled in keeping the Dead out of my head by the 'saints of San Michon, whatever edge Phoebe had in speed was countered by the fact Kestrel could read her mind."

The silversaint cracked his knuckles, shaking his head.

"Like I said, we were fucked. But when the fall is all that's left, the fall is all that matters. And so, as Dior pushed through the soldiers toward the city gates, we fought. Burning and bloodied bodies collapsing about us, thunder rolling and cannons barking and men screaming, Ettiene and I clashed as if alone, ancien power pitted against the brawn and speed of the paleblood born. He turned aside the best of my blows with his maul, simply bore the worst on his armor, grinning behind that bloody beard.

“*‘Know no shame, de León. All men must die.’*

“Phoebe cried out as Kestrel’s blade connected, slicing deep through her thigh.

“*‘Thou art the candleflame, and we the storm.’*

“I cursed, slipping on bloody stone, that maul missing my chin by a hair’s breadth.

“*‘Thou art the lamb, and we the wolves.’*

“Steel sang, thunder pounded, life and death dancing to the drum.

“*‘Thou art a blinking. And we forever.’*

“Dior was at the gates now, pounding with her fist, roaring to the battlements above, ‘*Damn you, let us in!* ’ Ettiene’s maul cut a black ribbon through the snow as it skimmed past my skull. Phoebe and the Maiden traded blows, blood drawn on both sides to the tempo of the storm above. But though numbers were yet against us, in the remainder that makes a difference in battle, there still lies luck. And that night, luck had a name. A handsome face. A steady hand and a good eye and the pistols I’d just given him.

“Joaquin Marenn had come a long way since his days in Aveléne. But back *in* those days, he’d learned to shoot; hunting small game out in the snows with his hounds. And at Dior’s side, looking across the bloody bridge to where the Maiden and Phoebe brawled, Joaquin Marenn drew one of those pistols and took aim.

“I was still fighting Ettiene, barely aware of Phoebe and Kestrel. I could hear the song of talon and scythe, the grunts of pain as more and more of Phoebe was sliced away. But in locking her mind into Phoebe’s, Kestrel wasn’t aware of the minds around her.

“She struck low, countered high, turning in a graceful pirouette and burying her longblade in Phoebe’s ribs. I caught sight of the blow over Ettiene’s shoulder, roaring Phoebe’s name as the Maiden’s steel sank home. The death’s-head on Kestrel’s face twisted as she drew back her scythe, set to take Phoebe’s head off her shoulders.

“*‘We are forever,’* she breathed.

“The shot took her in the skull, one in a fucking *million,* silver blasting through marble flesh and bone. Joaquin roared in triumph as Kestrel’s head whipped sideways, blood and brain spraying Phoebe’s face. My ’dancer was still pierced through the chest, dragging herself off Kestrel’s sword as the scythe clattered to the flagstones. And with a bubbling gasp, both she and Kestrel collapsed to the stone.

“Ettiene heard the shot, turning to see his sister and dark lover fall. And in that heartbeat, I pictured my bride, my baby, this bastard *laughing* as they died. I pictured all the shining moments we’d had, pondered all the memories I’d been robbed of, all the *might have*s and *if only*s and *could have been*s. And as the Black Crow turned back to me, Valor sliced the air, my voice a whisper beneath.

"'*Nothing* is forever.'

"The blow was perfect, still barely enough, carving through his beard and across his throat. Ettiene's head snapped forward, a wheeze boiling from his sundered neck, and in its wake came flame, searing my skin so fierce I staggered, hand to my eyes. With his voice box split, Ettiene wasn't really able to scream. But as his blood-soaked beard caught fire, something between a gurgle and a howl tore up from his burning throat. The fear of death come to claim its due. The terror at eternity's end.

"And unwilling to enter hell alone, the Black Crow charged.

"He struck like a hammer, breaking my ribs and sending us back into the railings. Lastbridge was solid granite, and *still* it shattered, the fall down to the Béni yawning below. I'd fallen farther from the walls of San Guillaume not so long ago, a girl I'd thought a boy in my arms. But Dior and I had fallen into flowing water then, and the river below was frozen solid.

"Desperate, I clawed at broken stone, catching hold as Ettiene tumbled past. Still howling, burning, arms pinwheeling as he fell through the dark, the Black Crow burst into ashes just before he struck the ice. I clung to my handhold over the gulf, gasping through bloody lips and punctured lungs. I couldn't pull myself up for my agony, the bridge shaking as those cannons continued to roar. But a face appeared above me then, golden eyes glittering, a bloody smile on her lips as she reached for me.

"'Figured I'd say aye if ye asked.'

"'W-what?'

"I took the hand Phoebe offered, wincing as she seized hold. And with a hiss through red teeth, she pulled. She was terribly wounded herself, cheeks bled pale under the freckles and scars, chest and throat drenched in blood. Yet still she hauled me back up over the shattered railing, standing over me as I crawled up to my hands and knees.

"'What did you s-say?'

"'Said ye should've m-married me.' She shrugged. 'Figured I'd say aye if ye asked.'

"They say you never appreciate a moment until it becomes a memory, coldblood. But as I met Phoebe's eyes amid that chaos, I knew this one would live in me forever.

"Her smile was beautiful.

"So was she.

"Even when the sword split her chest apart.

"Phoebe staggered, a foot and a half of red steel gleaming between us. I roared, clawing upright, desperate, all the world falling still. No cannon-fire drums. No song of steel. No gasp from Phoebe as Kestrel tore her sword free. Just silence, cold and absolute as the Iron Maiden swung her scythe, as that blade cleaved through air, neck, spine, taking Phoebe's head clean off her shoulders just an arm's length from my outstretched hand."

The Last Silversaint hung his head, running one thumb over the ink on his palm.

"A few inches and a thousand miles away."

Quiet fell in the cell, broken only by the rushing water, the turning page, the historian's sigh as he paused to dip his quill.

"You really don't have much luck with women, do you, de León?"

Rage darkening his one bloodshot eye, the silversaint was on his feet in a blinking. But two dozen thrallswords moved in reply, swords ringing as they were ripped from scabbards, Dario stepping between Gabriel and his master with fists clenched and heart thundering.

"What's wrong, Gabriel? Did *I* hurt *your* feelings?"

Jean-François smiled, glancing to the men bristling about them.

"Try," he said softly. "Just *try*."

Chocolat eyes drifted across the river, meeting a gaze darker still. Celene watched the historian from the opposite bank, loathing drawn in her every line and curve—save perhaps her lips, curled ever so slight to see her brother so utterly unmanned.

"I'm sure you were heartbroken at á Dúnnsair's death, Mlle Castia."

Jean-François could see Gabriel bristling from the corner of his eyes. But savoring that delicious rage and ignoring the rest completely, he kept his gaze on the Liathe.

"She was a brave warrior," Celene replied. "A good woman. We did not hold the fleshwitch close in our heart. But we'd no wish to see her die."

"Yet she *did*," the silversaint snarled. "And you did nothing to help, you selfish cunt."

Jean-François continued to ignore his other subject, focused now on Celene.

"He speaks in haste, perhaps. And rather more crudely than necessary. But he *does* raise a valid point, Mlle Castia. Where exactly *were* you during all this? You had found the Forever King, oui, but your so-called friends could have used you on the bridge?"

"To die with them?" Celene shook her head. "A heroic end was not my goal, Marquis. My faith had been shattered. My road to salvation in ashes. The last thing I wanted was to fall into the hell I'd spent eighteen years avoiding. But oui, folk I cared for were trapped on that span. Endless Legion around them. City sealed behind them. The former was a problem I could not solve alone. But the latter?"

"The gates," Jean-François said.

"Oui."

"But to open them was to open Rive Cœur to attack. You might save your friends, but you'd be inviting the Endless Legion into the heart of Augustin."

"I had done terrible things already, Historian. *Liar*. *Traitor*. *Killer*. Looking down at the death coming for my friends, I knew these were all titles I'd earned. But if folk were bound to see me for a monster anyway, what matter one more monstrous deed? God knows, people I cared for were scarce enough without letting the few I *did* have die."

Gabriel scoffed, sinking into his seat as Celene continued.

"We flew across the frozen river, the sea of Dead, toward the towering gatehouse of the Cœur. And on the frozen battlements, we coalesced. Soldiers in Augustin gold cried warning, unsure if we were friend or foe. Cannons barked, horns rang, the stink of burned meat and blood in our lungs as we charged along the ramparts. We could hear Dior pounding yet upon the gate below, roaring for someone to open them.

"'Hold on, mon amie,' we whispered.

"Knights in fullplate and tabards of the royal house stood outside the gatetower ahead. They bellowed warning, '*Halt in the name of the—'* but I was already gone, the body they lunged for splashing to the stones as we coalesced on the other side of the door.

"Soldiers turned, eyes wide, hands to their swords. Two score of knights stood the guard, along with six battlepriests of the Inquisition and High Inquisitrix Maya herself. They roared warning, bellowing scripture as they raised the silver wheels about their necks. I felt silvershot tear my body, holy light scorch my skin, eyes burned near to blinding. But I had *seen* it; a great lever and chain and wheel in the room's heart.

"And heedless of the pain, I lunged.

"Blessed blades pierced my body. Holy fire tore my skin. The lever itself was pure silver—no fools, these men who'd fought the Dead for years. Bloody tears spilling from blinded eyes, I seized hold, screaming as the metal burned my fingers to cinders, and yet, kicking the heavy jamb keeping the great mechanism locked, I pulled.

"For my brother.

"For my friend.

"For whatever was left of my cursed soul, I *pulled*.

"The lever moved, falling into place with a hollow *CLUNK*. The floor rumbled and chains sang, each link as heavy as a man, biting into cogs big as wagons. Soldiers fell upon me, hacking and cleaving, my eyes burned almost sightless, my hands charred to twigs, the inquisitors damning my soul to hell as the Inquisitrix bellowed at the top of her lungs.

"'Monster, what have you *DONE*?'

"With a last gasp, I wrenched the lever until it snapped, threw myself across the room and through the window bars, bursting apart as I fell. Pieces of me flung in all directions, some ablaze, some in ashes, all in pain. But enough was left to look down and see the answer to Maya's question.

"The mighty gate into Rive Cœur was rising.

"The Heart of Augustin was wide open.

“And death was flooding inside.”

XII

THE BATTLE OF AUGUSTIN

“ALL HELL BROKE loose then.”

Gabriel’s stare was fixed on the chymical globe, his voice low and deep.

“The gate was rising, the once-trapped soldiers now flooding through, Joaquin and Dior among them. I think I heard her roar my name amid the cannon fire and screams. But I was deaf to all at that point; bloodshot eyes drifting up from Phoebe’s corpse to the monstress who’d decapitated her.

“Raising her bloody scythe, Kestrel smiled.

“‘*All shall kneel.*’

“Madness took me at that moment. I’d lost Valor in my almost-fall, hands empty now. But reaching to my belt, I drew my twice-broken blade from her sheath. Lightning gleamed on cracked starsteel, Ashdrinker’s broken silver song filled my mind.

“*Live esh’nadai d-dov nem da.*

“And I threw myself at the Maiden.

“All about us, Dead fought the living, men fled for their lives or stood their ground or shit their britches and wailed for Mama. A thousand stories, a thousand little wars, each with victor and vanquished. But for Kestrel and I, there were only two, colliding in that storm of cannon blasts and splintering stone, marble flesh against broken blade, iron heart versus a heart that had perhaps taken one blow too many.

“*Four tablespoons of b-b-buhbuhbutter …*

“I can’t recall the ebb and flow, nor recount the blow for blow. She blooded me twice, I gifted her the same, Ashdrinker ringing as she bit Kestrel's plate, her blade cracking further with each blow. At the last, the Maiden caught me, burying her longblade in my belly. But unmoored, unmade, for the bride I'd lost, the lover dead at my feet, I stepped forward, pushing myself deeper on her sword and wrapping my hand about her throat.

"'I'll see you in h—'

"The blast struck the wall beside us. Blinding. Deafening. The cannoneers up on the battlements of Rive Cœur were still firing into their own troops, desperate to hold back that flood. And one of their shots had found us.

"We were blown apart, Kestrel and I; her back into the gatehouse wall, and me over the shattered railing. I fell twenty feet, struck the rocky slope of the northern bank, feeling something break inside. And then I was rolling, crashing down the snow-clad stones toward the Béni below. It could've been worse, I suppose—a straight fall onto solid ice from that height would've splashed me like a dropped bottle. But as it was, I was still a broken mess by the time I tumbled to rest fifty feet below.

"Ashdrinker lay on the ice beside me, a few feet from my outstretched hand. But I could do nothing but gasp and watch the battle above. A few thousand had made it back through the gates, the Dead held off by a valiant rearguard action led by little Lieutenant Deveraux. But those defenders had been engulfed now, a horde of wretched pouring over Lastbridge. Someone had tried to seal the city again, but enough corpses now clogged the entrance that the gate couldn't fall. And through that breach, the Dead came.

"Flat on my back, struggling just to breathe, I stared into the heavens above. I remembered my cousin's words—that the Almighty's hand was felt on this earth through the work of men like me. And I cursed God for a fool.

"Because in the end, what good had I done?

"I could hear them coming; more wretched, scrabbling across the ice toward me. And there I lay, too broken to move. I supposed this was as good a place to die as any. Somewhere dark. Somewhere small. And looking up to those empty heavens, I spoke. To that father who never loved me as a son.

"'I'll not beg your forgiveness,' I hissed. 'I'll not ask you for a single thing. But if I was ever your hand on this earth, I *demand* payment due.'

"The Dead were close enough to feel the chill off their skin. Smell the blood on their teeth. Opening wide at the sight of me, sprawled broken and helpless on the ice.

"'You keep them s-safe. Or I'll crawl up out of hell to choke you m-myself.'

"The first one struck, a little boy with moldy skin and ragged clothes, leaping atop my chest and sinking sticky teeth into my throat. I tried to fight, but another fell on me then, another, a pack of hungry dogs, tearing at the fallen lion.

"Dark closed in. Snow falling from the empty above. I saw her then.

Untouched by the hands of fate or the teeth of time. Long black hair and deep black eyes and a shadow that weighed a ton. Astrid reached out for me, across the wall of death. Her hand touched my cheek. Her whisper broke my heart.

“*Not yet.*

“The shot rang in the night, silver and sizzling. The Dead boy atop me lifted his head, the others hissing hatred. More shots rang then, five in total, *boom, boom, boom*. And as the foulbloods fell away, beyond the cannon fire and screams I heard a familiar song.

“*Shuffshuffshuff!*

“Horns pierced the storm, mechwork bows humming, the foulbloods about me left in cinders. Rolling onto my belly, gasping, bleeding, I squinted through the tumbling snows, eastward upriver. And though the dark was near bottomless, my heart was lifted up to see them; thousands of my countrymen, marching down the frozen flows toward the beleaguered city. They bore the standards of my house, twin lions and twin swords emblazoned on their tabards and in their hearts. I could see a figure running at their fore, glowing silver, a brace of wheellocks across his chest and a greatsword of silversteel in his hand. And at their head stood a lioness, burning sword raised high as she roared.

“‘*Long live House de León!* ’”

“But they left you.”

The Last Silversaint glanced up from the chymical globe.

“Lachlan,” Jean-François said. “Charlotte. They abandoned you to save their own skins.”

Gabriel shook his head then, eye alight as he sighed.

“I *pity* you, vampire.”

Silence rang in the cell, a long and hollow moment.

Jean-François glowered, tapping his quill on the page.

“The soldiers of León came onward,” Gabriel continued. “Flaming arrows streaking through the night, infantry charging under cover of their archers. The Endless Legion were spilling into Rive Cœur now, and I could hear battle in the city beyond. But under Charlotte’s command, the army of León was flooding up through the broken defenses of the Nord. I saw the stratagem in it, same as Lachie had used in Maergenn; the Dead were pushing into the Cœur, but our troops were cutting behind them, catching them between hammer and anvil. And I realized we might still win this night.

“Red drool spilling through my fangs, I crawled up onto hands and knees. My bloody and broken fingers found Ashdrinker, closing slow about her hilt.

“*Live esh’nadai-dov nem da.*

“*Four tablespspspspoons—*

“‘Godssakes, Ash, g-give it a r-rest.’

“I slipped her home, trying to stand but collapsing to my knees. Strong hands grabbed me then, the glow of silver enveloping me like the arms of an old friend.

"The arms of a brother.

"'Ye look like shite twice stepped in, ye crusty bastard,' Lachlan smiled.

"'I'm thirty-four, you little p-prick.'

"I grasped him tight, unable to even stand. But Lachie held me upright, fumbling in his bandolier for his pipe. As he loaded a dose, as the men of León poured up the banks through the shattered walls of Rive Nord, I fixed my eyes on their commander, stalking across the ice toward me. She regarded me with a wry smile, dark eye flashing as she spoke.

"'You laid it on a little thick, I thought.'

"I coughed bloody, raised a brow in question.

"Charlotte shook her head. '*It's the last page of our lives that matters most'*?

"She reached into her hauberk and handed it back; the journal I'd gifted her at San Maximille, along with those parting words. The book was opened to the final page, and there upon the bloodstained parchment, I could see the message I'd writ for her.

"*'Do you love it enough to die for it? '* I murmured.

"Charlotte smiled then. 'You'd have made a good baron.'

"I drew her into a fierce embrace, tears burning in my eyes.

"'You make a better one.'"

"Touching, de León."

Jean-François turned a page, slowly dipping his quill.

"Most touching indeed."

Chocolat eyes glanced across the river, one brow arched.

"And where were *you* during this heartwarming reunion, Mlle Castia?"

The Liathe hung her head, black curtains of hair tumbling over her face.

"Drenched in blood, Marquis. That gate had been opened by our hand, and every death thereafter was another stain on our soul. But as we re-formed upon a rooftop in Rive Cœur, our eyes were not really fixed on the drama below, but *beyond*."

Celene's gaze drifted to the river now, those black and rushing depths.

"While we'd spilled our blood in the gatehouse, one tiny drop of it had crawled farther into the Forever King's tent. And while we had fought, it had watched.

"It was among strange company to be sure. For while tens of thousands of men and corpses did bloody battle but a few miles distant, the gathering within that tent was serene. The Forever King sat at table's head with black gaze upturned, steering the battle through the minds of his brood. His presence filled the room. Froze the very blood. In the distance could be heard ringing horns, booming cannon, but that Court of Blood was utterly still.

"Baptiste Sa-Ismael sat by a brazier of softly burning coals, shivering in that terrible cold. His husband sat beside him, tense as steel. Aaron had been disarmed, but there was little point in binding him—he dare not raise a finger to a vampire as powerful as the First of the Five. Instead, he sat with hands clasped, pale blue eyes on the porcelain angel opposite.

“Patience was drawing scenes from the battle, gleaned from the mind of the dark father at table’s head. She sketched with preternatural swiftness, gut-churning accuracy—moments of heroism and carnage and all between. She sat on Morgane’s lap, the Prince’s black eyes fixed upon Aaron, silence ringing like funeral bells.

“Until Gabriel slew Ettiene, that is.

“Fabién Voss had the seeming of marble come to life. Beautiful, surely. But cold. *Hard.* The Voss were not named for the steel of their skin but the iron of their hearts, and it would have been easy to believe their forebear as incapable of feeling as the stone he resembled. But when my brother graced the Black Crow’s throat with Dior’s blood, that façade cracked. Just a sliver. A hair’s breadth. But beyond it, rippling across every mind in that tent, the thralls outside, the city beyond, we felt a rage *incandescent.*

“Morgane watched her father slowly rise, and though she uttered not a word, we knew they spoke without speaking. Patience lifted her eyes from her sketches.

“‘Papa Fabién? What’s wrong?’

“*‘Thy brave and noble papa is … misbehaving, my dove.*’

“‘Oh *no*. Are you … cross with him?’

“*‘Terribly.*’

“Voss glanced to Baptiste, the blackthumb’s face bloodless. Fear gripped us then—for what this monster might do to Gabriel’s friends or our niece in his desire for vengeance.

“*‘I fear thou art all out of brothers, my sweet, my love, my angel dear.*’

“Voss’s courtiers glanced to each other, fear in blood-rimmed eyes. Aaron bristled, fists clenched, doomed from the outset yet still prepared to die defending his beau. But Voss made no move toward punishment, kneeling instead at his young daughter’s side. The girl looked truly upset at Ettiene’s fall, but he only smiled, cupping her cheek.

“*‘We shall have to make ye some more, aye?* ’

“Patience matched Fabién’s smile. ‘Oui.’

“The Forever King looked again to Baptiste. ‘*Be this one worthy, think ye?* ’

“Voss’s brood turned their gaze upon the blackthumb as one, hostility dripping in the very air. We saw Ambassador Nicolette tilt her head, confused at Voss’s words. But Patience regarded the blackthumb silently, pouting in thought.

“‘Oui,’ she finally nodded. ‘He has kindly eyes.’

“Baptiste frowned, exchanging a glance with his husband as Voss spoke on.

"*'Thy brave and noble papa? Wouldst thou spend forever with him? '*

"'Oh, oui,' Patience replied, eyes alight. 'Please, *please,* Papa Fabién, make it so.'

"Voss kissed her brow, lips so cold they left a paler mark on her porcelain skin. Rising, he brushed his lapels, and with a meaningful glance at Morgane, turned to leave.

"'Where are you going?' Aaron asked softly.

"The court of Voss bristled to hear their king questioned by a mere whelp. Fabién paused, glancing to the lordling from the very edges of his eyes.

"*'Hear me, Aaron Dyvok. There be* nothing *Forever's King will not do for family.'*

"Voss swept out into the night, and at a glance from Morgane, several courtiers followed. In the silence of his wake, Patience returned to sketching, humming to herself. Baptiste took Aaron's hand. But the Lord of Aveléne stared at the Prince of Forever.

"'What does he mean?'

"'He's going to get the girl,' Patience replied, not looking up. 'The pretty —'

"*'Now, now, sister,'* Morgane scolded. '*Remember what we told thee about secrets? '*

"The girl pouted, glancing to Baptiste. The blackthumb looked pale as death surrounded by those living corpses, sitting as close to his husband as could be without actually climbing into his lap. Patience leaned forward, her voice a conspiratorial whisper.

"'Don't worry. Dying doesn't hurt much.'"

Jean-François glanced up at that, a small frown on his brow.

"What did she mean? The child spoke as if Voss could turn Sa-Ismael *intentionally*. But the dark gift is capricious, given only by the hand of chance."

"Patience, coldblood."

The historian glanced at the silversaint, lips pressed thin.

"We're almost there, now."

"I turned my mind back to Rive Cœur," Celene continued. "Back to the hell I'd helped unleash. Its defenders were the imperium's best, but the sudden opening of the gates had caught all off guard. Guns still roared, soldiers fought with silvered steel and flame, and for a time, any corpse charging through the breach was brought low. But their numbers felt endless, Marquis, and Prince Philippe had spent much of his strength in supporting Maarten's doomed rally. In truth, his troops were scrambling, the Dead breaking out of the gatehouse and into the streets beyond, yet more flooding up the walls and over the battlements. The air was thick with the stink of blood and burning flesh. Barking guns and rolling thunder. Shouted prayers and bubbling screams.

“Augustin’s citizens were gripped with panic, the streets flooded, folk tumbling into canals and crushed underfoot in the stampede. Down thoroughfares and over bridges they fled, toward the only sanctuary that might hold now—holy ground. Every chapel and church in Rive Cœur was packed with terrified citizens praying for salvation. But more of course, and most, they flooded toward the holiest ground in the empire—across the canals of Place San Maximille toward the goldglass spires of Cathédrale de Lumière.

“We were badly wounded from our attack in the gatehouse—hands scorched black, body riven with silver, blood almost burned from our veins. But still we ran, limping across the rooftops above those flooded streets, listening over the hymn of cannon and rifle, of steel and teeth, of butchers and butchered for some sign of—

“‘Get your hands off me, you fuck-eyed cackgobbler!’

“*‘Dior…’*

“She was in a little jeweler’s square off the main drag, flooded with men. Most were remnants of her Unbound, but no few soldiers of Maarten’s force had flocked to her banner. They watched now as she roared, chest-to-chest with young Joaquin Marenn.

“‘Get out of my *fucking* way, Joaquin!’

“‘I can’t do that, Dior.’

“‘I’m ordering you! Stand aside!’

“But the houndboy shook his head. ‘I gave my word to the Black Lion I’d protect—’

“‘Dickhead, Gabe is still *out* there! Phoebe too! We can’t just leave them, w—’

“‘Phoebe is slain.’

“Dior looked up, face gone bloodless. We stood on the eaves above, burned and bloodied. My heart twisted as I saw my words sink home. The tears welling in her eyes.

“‘Phoebe…’

“‘I am sorry, Dior. The Iron Maiden took her.’

“‘Oh, God,’ Dior moaned, sinking to her knees. ‘Oh, *God,* no…’

“‘We can spare no time for grief, mon amie.’ I looked about then, meeting the eyes of her loyal Unbound. ‘The Forever King himself takes the field! He comes for one reason and one alone: to seize Dior in his clutches! That cannot happen!’

“‘We stay here, we’ll be overrun,’ a Callum growled.

“‘You should take her, Mlle Castia,’ Joaquin told us. ‘Across the roofs to Cathédrale de Lumière. No vampire can enter holy ground. Not even Forever’s King.’

“‘I’m n-not leaving you.’

“Dior had risen back to her feet, jaw clenched. And though the ash on her cheeks was riven by tears, her voice was fierce and hard.

"'I'm not leaving *any* of you.'

"'Dior—'

"'Don't try, M. Marenn.' She gazed to the men about her, hands in fists. 'You've all walked with me through hell. We fight or fall as we have this whole way. *Together*.'

"Joaquin could only smile, shaking his head in wonder. The Unbound pressed hands to hearts, forefingers and thumbs outstretched. And Dior looked up to me.

"'We need to pull back to the plaza. Lead us on, mon amie.'

"We nodded, tears in our eyes that, despite it all, she might still name us friend. And by her command, we ran, across snow-clad rooftops toward the city's heart. The roads were packed with soldiers and citizens, but with eyes above the crush, we found a backway not totally choked with people. Over bridges, down doglegs and squeezeways we led her and her men, toward the city's heart. We heard explosions behind, the song of shattering stone and black ignis. Bedlam was come to Augustin now, all form and reason lost, the heart of imperial power on earth bleeding its best into the snow.

"A tumble of foulbloods came over the roofs, down the alleys—as always, Dior's blood seemed a lodestone to the Dead. But between us and the Unbound, they were cut down; sleepless mothers and fathers and children, finally laid to rest. House to house we fought, Dior stopping to help any wounded she found. But from the screams behind, the rising stink of blood and rot, we knew Philippe's men were being overrun. Kestrel still walked among the Dead. Forever's King was on his way. We were running out of time."

"We'd made the climb back up to Rive Nord," Gabriel said. "Pushing now on Lastbridge. I was still wounded, dragging down desperate lungfuls from Lachie's pipe in the hopes of healing my worst hurts. But my brother and cousin rose to the occasion. Lachie led the charge across Lastbridge, aegis shining in the night, the sky lit by hundreds of burning shots from mechwork bows. My old 'prentice claimed the heads of three Voss highbloods personally, and though pierced by steel and shot, he refused to fall. Charlotte stood beside me, eye and sword both ablaze. Caught between Philippe's forces and ours, the legion was pressed, but we couldn't cut our way into the city fast enough.

"Like the defenders within, we were running out of time."

"In Voss's tent," Celene said, "the court had grown more talkative in the King's absence, whispering now of the battle. In the midst of it all, Morgane sat with Patience on her lap, the princess still humming as she drew scenes of slaughter.

"'I beg pardon, Majesty.'

"It was Nicolette speaking, sat beside Aaron with her dog in her arms. At the sound of her voice, Patience lifted her gaze, my heart aching to note she had her father's eyes.

"*Wulfric's* eyes.

"'Oui?' she asked.

"Nicolette chuckled softly, hand to her décolletage as she beamed. 'Oh, aren't you darling? No, I meant the *other* Majesty, Majesty.'

"Patience's eyes narrowed, but Morgane lifted one dark brow.

"*'Hast thou desire of refreshment, Ambassador?'*

"'Well … that would be *lovely,* actually,' Nicolette replied with a gracious smile. 'But … in his absence, I rather thought to ask about your royal father.'

"Morgane blinked, and after a moment, four thrallswords marched into the tent. Each was armed with longblade and wheellock, clad in heavy plate. Their tabards were embroidered with ravens, skulls on their pauldrons. Though clearly elite veterans, none looked more than thirty, the eldest thumping a gauntlet against his chest.

"'Majesty?'

"*'Thy choice, Ambassador?'* Morgane asked. '*Soldier's fare this night, I fear.*'

"'Oh.' Nicolette blinked, glancing to the swords. 'The … blond, I suppose.'

"Morgane dismissed the other soldiers with a glance, while the fourth—a handsome young monsieur with a trimmed goatee—marched to Nicolette's side. As he unbuckled his gauntlet, drew a knife from his swordbelt and began bleeding, the ambassador spoke on.

"'I am wondering why your noble father risks himself on the field. The young princess made mention of a … girl? Could she be this Grail we've heard whisp—'

"*'What have we told thee about secrets, little sister?'*

"Morgane was speaking again to Patience. And though she did not deign to look up from her drawing, the youngest Prince of Forever replied softly.

"'Worth more kept than sold, sister.'

"Morgane smiled thin, eyes on Nicolette's. The ambassador murmured thanks as the young 'sword finished filling her goblet, returning Morgane's smile.

"'Wise beyond her years, this little one.'

"'More than most in this room.'

"This a growl, come from Aaron de Coste. As Nicolette glanced to the lordling, Aaron rose to his feet, seizing the longblade at the bleeding thrall's belt. And in a blinking, with the song of steel through bone, Aaron took the soldier's head clean off his shoulders.

"Nicolette shrieked, blood sprayed, highblooded Ironhearts roared warning. For interminable hours had Aaron sat in this court of killers, not daring to act for fear of Forever's King. But Voss was gone now, Baptiste already snatching up the fallen thrall's wheellock and dagger. Aaron lashed out at a courtier beside him, sending her back through the tent wall with a cry. Spinning like a dancer, he struck another Ironheart down, taking the fledgling’s legs off at the knees with the unholy strength of his line.

“Sweeping a sluice of blood off his blade, Aaron held out one red hand.

“‘Time to go, Patience.’”

“I’d no idea *any* of this was happening,” Gabriel growled, grey eye fixed on his sister. “No idea where Voss’s command post even *was*. If someone had bothered to tell me, what happened next might have gone *very* differently.”

“Ah, here it is at last,” Celene sighed. “Blame me for your own cursed failings.”

“Why bother?” the silversaint spat. “The blame you own could already touch the fucking clouds. You opened that gate, Celene. You *let them in*. The blood of every man and woman and child who died in Rive Cœur that night is on *you*.”

“They would have broken through anyway,” Celene hissed. “You know it as well as I, Gabriel. The only difference being, Dior would have been *slaughtered* on that bridge with all her Unbound, and you left childless once more!”

“Fuck y—”

“Enough, Chevalier.” Aiming a warning glance at Gabriel, the historian looked to his sister. “What of the Grail then, Mlle Castia? Where was she now?”

“Where we had led her,” the Liathe replied, still glowering at her brother. “To *safety*. The way had been long, each of her men drenched in gore and ash. But finally, they had made their way under our guidance to the plaza of San Maximille.

“The square was bedlam, brimming with terrified citizens and bloodied soldiers. Cathédrale de Lumière and the Pontifex’s Palace were already packed to the rafters, no room left on holy ground. And yet, tens of thousands still flooded that plaza. In her wisdom, the Empress had opened the gates to Château Impérial, but only women and children were being given leave to enter. Folk all about us were screaming. Weeping. Begging. Praying.

“And the Dead were *coming*.

“The soldiery guarding one of the bridges recognized Dior, allowing us to pass. And cursing, she pushed her way toward that great statue of the city’s founder. Maximille sat astride his unicorn, solid marble, looming fifty feet above his terrified citizens. But behind a spiked palisade about his feet, surrounded by knights and red-clad thugs, a bloodied Duke Maarten, and High Inquisitrix Maya herself, stood Maximille’s descendant, clad in gore-spattered plate and roaring at the top of his lungs.

“‘Women and children *only*!’ Prince Philippe bellowed. ‘Any man of fighting age, take up arms and stand your ground!’

“*‘Philippe!’* the Grail cried.

“The Prince squinted through the mob, eyes lighting up. ‘Dior?’

“‘Philippe!’

“‘Make a path, damn you!’

“Explosions rocked the square, distant but thunderous. Dior reached her husband’s side, grasping his arm with one bloody hand. ‘The *fuck* is that noise?’

“‘We’re blowing the bridges to slow them down!’

“‘There are still *people* back there!’

“‘I doom them now or *us* later!’

“‘The Prince speaks wisdom, Dior,’ we told her. ‘Fault him not.’

“Eyes found us amid the crush then, the Inquisitrix’s face twisted with fury as she roared to her red-clad thugs, ‘*Seize* that abomination!’

“Soldiers strode forward and I clenched my teeth, but Dior raised her hands.

“‘Stop, *stop,* we’re on the same side, what the *hell* are you doing?”

“‘This monstrosity opened the gate and allowed the Dead to enter!’

“‘You mean that gate the Holy Grail was *trapped* outside?’ I spat. ‘I opened it to save her life, and if you think that life not worth the weighing, look about you now!’

“The Prince clenched his jaw. The Inquisitrix glowered, but held her tongue. And in that ringing still, Dior said softly, ‘You shouldn’t have done that, Celene.’

“‘Would you rather be dead?’

“‘I’d rather me dead than anyone else! I’m no one special anymore!’

“‘Oh, Dior…’

“I gestured to the folk around us. Though our doom rushed onward with deathless feet, a strange calm had fallen in the square. The children who’d noticed Dior had ceased their tears. The small folk called her by name, lifting thumb and forefinger aloft. And the soldiers looking into the eyes of the oncoming Dead yet stood a little taller, their hearts buoyed up by the simple blessing of her presence.

“‘*La demoiselle du Graal!* ’ one little girl cried.

“We shook our head and met Dior’s eyes.

“‘You *know* that is untrue.’

“‘You should head into the château, Dior,’ Philippe said. ‘The walls are strong, and the guns are—’

“‘I’m not leaving you.’

“She looked about to her Unbound, to the Prince’s retinue, to the troops guarding the roads into the square—both battle-hard soldiers and peasants press-ganged with wooden spears and tinpot helms. And finally she looked to me.

“‘I’m not leaving any of you.’

“More citizens and soldiers were flooding over the bridges into the plaza, fleeing the oncoming horde. But soon Philippe gave the order two of the three spans should be blown. We flinched as the black ignis was ignited, explosions rocking the square. Marble splintered, ruined spans tumbling into the steaming canals with a crash. But the waterways here were only thirty feet across, and not long would such a barrier hold the Endless Legion.

"Duke Maarten stood beside his Prince, teeth splintered from my brother's fists. Pressing a kerchief to his bloody mouth, he looked sidelong at his liege.

"'Majesty … at the walls of the Nord, the Forever King said he would quit the field if we handed the Grail over to his keeping. If the choice now lies between us and her…'

"Philippe turned, meeting the Duke's eyes. You must remember we were blind to happenings at the gate at this point, Marquis—we'd no idea the armies of León had arrived. For all Philippe knew, what he *saw* was all he *had*. And still the Prince shook his head.

"'You shame yourself, Chevalier.'

"'Dawn is a few hours distant,' we said. 'They'll be weaker come the sun.'

"All squinted through the dark, the tumbling snows. By the light of burning buildings we could see them now—pale shapes sprinting over rooftops and up the throughfares. Empty eyes. Endless thirst. Dior clenched her jaw, knowing she likely looked upon our doom. But glancing to the men about her, still she tried to buoy their spirits.

"'What's the first thing you're going to do when this is over, Jackson?'

"Beside her, a hulking Ossian fellow scowled. 'Kiss my wife and babe, Holy Maid.'

"She glanced to a younger lad with eyes of green. 'How about you, Liam?'

"'Barrel of wine for me, I think.'

"'Aye,' one of the Callums nodded. 'Preferably with some fresh cunny in it.'

"'Honestly, I could take or leave the wine,' Dior murmured.

"The men chuckled, Joaquin grinning wide. 'And you, Holy Maid?'

"'This shite stinks,' she growled, sniffing the black gore staining her hauberk. 'I swear to all Seven Martyrs, first thing I'm diving into when this is done is a fucking *bath*.'

"'You could always grab a quick wash in the canals.' Joaquin raised one hand in oath. 'I promise to avert my eyes. They're not too clean, but the water looks warm at least.'

"Dior blinked.

"And turning slowly to Joaquin, she blinked again.

"'Warm,' she whispered.

"The houndboy raised one brow. Meeting her eyes, we whispered.

"'… Dior?'

"'Joaquin,' she breathed, her gaze catching fire. 'You're a *genius*.'

"'Well, so I've often said, but nobody—'

"'You're a fucking *GENIUS*!' Dior grabbed the lad's ears and planted a kiss square on his lips. Turning to the Prince's retinue, she roared, '*Inquisitrix! '*

"The dour prioress of the Tower of Tears raised one grey brow.

"'Where's the Pontifex?' Dior demanded.

"'… In his palace, I imagine.'

"'Well, go fetch him!' Dior yelled. 'Him and every bishop, cardinal, priest, and fucking altar boy you can find! Now! *Now,* goddamn you!'

"Maya scowled at the Grail's tone. Dior was still *technically* a Princess of the Realm, but the Inquisitrix looked toward her Prince for confirmation. Philippe himself was frowning at Dior now, wondering if she were half-mad, or had simply snapped all the way.

"'Dior, what are you thinking?'

"'Philippe—'

"We took her arm then, squeezing tight. 'The Forever King is coming. Whatever stratagem you've conceived, if you share it with others, he may snatch it from their minds.'

"The Grail looked to Philippe, eyes ablaze.

"'Do you trust me?'

"'I do.'

"'Then fetch me those holy men, Philippe de Augustin. And meet me at the most romantic place you can think of.'"

XIII

RED ICE

"BLOOD FREEZES WHEN it falls on fresh snow."

Gabriel's voice hung in the dark, gaze fixed on the empty goblet in his hand.

"A splash of it will crystalize. Like rubies scattered on a bedsheet, or shards of a broken window on a cathedral floor. Legend had it we killed so many vampires at Crimson Glade that the snows were still stained red thirteen years later. But *so* much blood was spilled in the streets of Augustin that night, the snows melted to water before freezing solid again. And in the end, we found ourselves fighting on ice."

He shook his head and sighed.

"Red ice.

"We'd taken back Lastbridge, the soldiers of León pushing slow into Augustin's streets. The worst of the wounds I'd suffered were healed now, thanks to the three pipes I'd smoked and the remnants of Phoebe's blood. But her loss still cut bone-deep. I fought alongside Lachie like we'd done in days of glory, back when there still seemed a chance of victory in all this. But the icy red cobblestones were *covered* in corpses, so many slain I wondered what victory might even look like anymore.

"One thought kept me going. One light in all that darkness.

"The bulk of the legion were stabbing toward Place San Maximille, but some had remained behind to stymie our push. Every foot we won seemed a mile, yet even in the longest night, the sun must rise, and with it would come a sort of hope—the Dead weakened in its feeble light. And to that grim promise, I clung.

"'We're coming, Dior,' I vowed. 'Just hold on.'

"But cutting our way into a crossroad a few hundred yards into the city, I felt what little hope I had fade. The space was broad; the meeting of four roads near a wide canal, once the site of a broad granite bridge leading farther into the Cœur. The bridge had been destroyed—black ignis shattering ancient stone like the fist of God. But I saw with horror the solution the Dead had fashioned to replace it.

"Corpses, Historian. Corpses by the hundreds. The bodies of slain soldiers and thralls, weighed down by their armor and thrown into the canal, piled atop each other until they formed a horrid span of dead flesh over that running water. The legion had flowed across it, pushing farther into the bleeding city. But a host of leeches had stayed behind to guard it, their commander now fixing cold eyes on Lachie and me.

"She was drenched in blood, the skull she'd daubed upon her face now lost beneath a mask of dripping red. Some of that blood was Phoebe's, I knew, rage boiling my veins as she stalked forward, scythe in one hand, longblade the other.

"'*The Lion and his cub.*' Kestrel smiled. '*Who shall fall first, I wonder?* '

"'Stay back, Charli,' Lachlan warned. 'This is fer Gabe and me.'

"My cousin bristled, soldiers fanning out about her and sizing up the Dead.

"'There seems enough for all of us.'

"'I'd not see ye harmed, love. This cunt is the devil herself.'

"'I will *not* be sat on the sidelines like some wilting maid, Lachlan á Craeg. If such is your wish, seek a bride whose name be not de León. I stand with my men to the end.'

"'*I asked the kit I slew.*' Kestrel's eyes fell upon my cousin. '*Ask now the same of thee. O ashen fool, O mother of slaves unborn, know ye not, what ye now behold?* '

"Kestrel glanced to the horror about her with dripping smile.

"'*This* be *the end.*'"

"Near Voss's tent," Celene said, "the snows ran also red. Aaron de Coste and Baptiste Sa-Ismael fought a running battle away from the Forever King's command post, our mote following in their wake. Baptiste carried a burning torch, swinging it desperately at anything that moved. Aaron fought one-handed, the longblade he'd stolen snapped in half on the skin of some Ironheart highblood. And over his shoulder, thrashing and kicking against his unholy strength, was my niece.

"'*Unhand* me, villain!'

"Their escape had been mostly due to surprise—none really expected this son of Dyvok to be foolish enough to *attack* the brood of the Forever King.

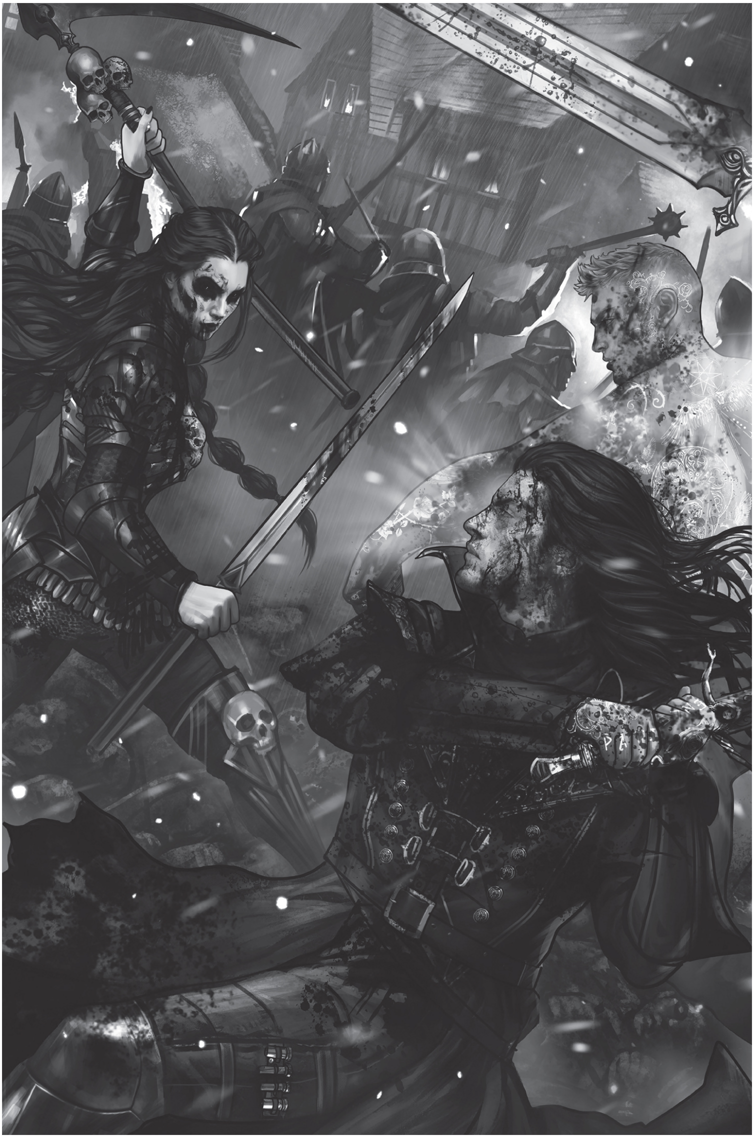
But de Coste and Sa-Ismael had cut a bloody swathe through Ironhearts and tent wall both, bursting out into the night and running now toward the burning city, Patience squealing all the while.

"'Let me *down,* I said!'

"'Hush, child,' Aaron hissed, dashing through the dark.

"'When Papa Fabién catches you, he will be *so* cross!'

"'We take you to your true father now! Be silent, I beg you!'



“A crossbow bolt flew out of the night, skimming Aaron’s ear. He cried warning, shoving his husband aside as another hissed through the air. Baptiste struck the snow, Aaron hurled his broken blade, punching clean through the chest of one of the thrallswords now emerging from the darkness. Unarmed, Aaron charged the other three, Patience wriggling like a landed fish upon his shoulder. Even unarmed, one hand holding the shouting girl, his form was brilliant, and in a handful of heartbeats, all three men lay crushed in the bloody snow. But turning to his husband …

“‘Oh God,” Aaron whispered.

“‘I’m aright,’ Baptiste hissed. ‘It’s n-not bad.’

“The crossbow bolt protruded from the blackthumb’s thigh, blood steaming in the night. Patience’s eyes fixed on the sluice of delicious red as Aaron helped his husband to his feet. But torches were cutting through the dark behind now, drawing ever closer.

“‘Can you walk?’ Aaron asked.

“‘I think s-so…’

“Cursing, Aaron dashed back to the fallen thralls. As Patience writhed and hollered, he bound the child in steel, bending the blades of those dead men about her wrists and ankles like manacles, and stuffing fabric into her mouth to stifle her cries. Dragging the bolt loose from his husband’s leg, he made a swift binding of a ripped cloak. And one arm about his love, the other slinging the hog-tied Patience back over his shoulder, Aaron turned to run.

“*‘Whyfore dost thou flee? ’*

“Aaron’s jaw clenched, and turning, her saw *her*. Chocolat curls and gown of translucent lace and eyes of midnight. Prowling like a wolf on the edge of ancient firelight. Hundreds of years her tally. Thousands of murders her sin. Fifthborn Prince of Forever.

“*‘Whyfore wouldst thou run from happiness, Aaron Dyvok? ’*

“‘Happiness?’ Aaron scoffed. ‘What madness do you spit now?’

“*‘No madness,’* Morgane breathed. ‘*Truth speak I. ’Pon my royal blood, I vow it. Lay down thine arms and return with me now, and I tell thee true, thou shalt before this year’s end taste happiness beyond thy brightest dreams.*’

“‘But I do *not* dream, madame. Not since I became what you behold.’ Aaron shook his head, blue eyes afire. ‘You can give me nothing I want.’

“*‘But to thy love, we can give* everything.’

“Morgane’s gaze drifted to Baptiste, dripping blood into the snow.

“*‘We can give* forever.’

“Aaron’s eyes narrowed. His fists curled closed. More courtiers were slinking from the darkness now, thralls drawing near, torches ablaze. Patience wriggled upon his shoulders, Baptiste whispered his name. But Aaron spoke not a word.

“*‘Hast thou not wondered? Why my dread father pushes in a battle he may actually lose? Why he be prepared to sacrifice a legion of Dead built over* *decades? Consign his children to the fire? Risk his own flesh on the field to attain one single,* mortal *girl?* ’

“Morgane tilted her head.

“*‘Hast thou not wondered? The* real *reason?* ’”

Jean-François glanced up as Castia fell silent, butterflies taking wing in his long-dead belly. Here it was at last—the answer his dread Empress sought. Not some addle-witted nonsense about reunited famille, but the *true* secret at the heart of Voss’s desire for Lachance. But into the quiet between them, the silversaint slipped.

“At the crossroads,” Gabriel said, “our advance had halted in the face of Kestrel’s cadre, and against her wall, we crashed. It was whispered the Iron Maiden had slain ten thousand men, Historian, and while I know how legends can swell in the telling, I’ll tell you now—Kestrel Voss was the most fearsome swordswoman I *ever* faced in battle.

“She was yet blind in one eye—blown out by Joaquin’s lucky silver shot. Still wounded as I was, I took her sightless side, Lachie her other. Ashdrinker yet slept in my scabbard—I dared not risk her against Kestrel’s skin again, fighting instead with some fallen fool’s silvered sword. All about us, the men of León pushed, battering against her Dead.

“*‘Thou art weak, de León. Tired. Old.*’

“Kestrel stepped aside my thrust, striking at Lachlan.

“*‘Do ye not desire sleep? Darkness? Peace?* ’

“Lachie parried her blow, answered with his own, easily thwarted. And with a hiss, she kicked him in the chest, shattering ribs and sending him flying across the cobblestones.

“*‘All this can I grant thee.*’

“Though our training as ’saints helped keep her out of our heads, still she had a sense of our thoughts. Not enough to see our blows coming, surely, but enough to see our hearts. And talking true, coldblood? Kestrel was right. I *was* tired. Hurt. Thirsty. Worn all the way down to cracking bone. I felt like I’d been fighting these things all my life.

“And in the end, what had it got me?

“I know now she was playing me. Preying on the weariness she sensed in mind and body. But that night, it was enough to wrongfoot me. And as my silver-heeled boot came down hard on a slick of that red *red* ice, it slipped. Just an inch. But enough.

“Palebloods die hard, they say. And Phoebe’s blood still burned in my veins. But as Kestrel’s longblade pierced my chest, I wager I came as close to death as I’d ever been. Dark steel sliced up through my ribs, perhaps an inch from my heart. With a cry I fell, blood spraying like rubies across a bedsheet, collapsing facedown on the cobblestones.

“Kestrel raised her scythe. But with a crash of silversteel, her deathblow was thwarted. Lachlan stood over me, gasping, the Maiden’s blade caught on his own. And lashing out, his sword split the marble of her cheek to the bone.

"'Not tonight, Voss.'

"My old 'prentice smiled.

"'His back. My blade.'"

Celene sighed, rising to her feet. Her motion was sinuous, serpentine, the grace of stolen centuries at her beck. She began to pace, slow, silken, along the rocky shore.

"Across the city, Dior and I now stood before a set of great double doors. They loomed twenty feet high, embossed with images of smiths at work. A basalt statue of Eloise, Angel of Retribution, stood beside them, cupping a font of holy water."

Jean-François raised one brow.

"The Ironmongers' Guildworks? La Rivière de Fer?"

"Just so." The Liathe nodded. "The crush in the streets had been tight, and in the end, we had been forced to abandon the Unbound, lifting Dior and carrying her over the rooftops on our back. And now she pounded upon those doors with her fists.

"'Open up in the name of the Empress!'

"A smaller slot in the doors opened wide, and beyond we saw even wider eyes.

"'Mlle du Graal?'

"'Open up, Guildmaster,' she begged. 'In the name of God and mercy.'

"The great doors cracked wide, and we recognized the portly man beyond—one of the seigneurs who had taken Dior on her tour of this facility with her Prince not so long ago. He looked at us with fear, Dior with question, a horde of terrified citizens and ironworkers gathered behind him. Though the night outside was freezing, we saw sweat on the guildmaster's lips, the air within the foundry near sweltering.

"'Seek you shelter? We have room b—'

"'The pumpworks,' she said, grasping his arm. 'The water you bring up from the Béni for the canals. You heat it with the ironworks, oui? To keep it flowing all year round?'

"'Oui,' the little man nodded, utterly baffled. 'Why?'

"She looked over her shoulder as someone called her name. We saw Prince Philippe dashing down the street with the Unbound and a cadre of soldiers. And behind him, we spied Inquisitrix Maya and a passel of breathless holy men.

"Dior turned back to the guildmaster, fire in her eyes.

"'Make it hotter.'"

"I lay on the bloody stone," Gabriel sighed. "Struggling just to breathe.

"My hands were covered in blood, punctured chest slurping every time I inhaled. All around, men were fighting, falling, breathing their last. Ash thick as the snows. And in the heart of the crossroads, Lachie and the Maiden danced.

"Lachlan á Craeg had been raised a son of Dyvok, trained a brother of San Michon. He'd been fighting the Dead more than a decade, and I know not the tally of vampires he'd ended. But Kestrel had walked fields of battle for *centuries*. Like powder and flame they met, steel crashing, sparks flying, snowflakes cleft in two by their blades. The silver of his aegis burned like holy flame, the Maiden's eye narrowed against that fire. But still, she was old when this empire was young, and she had Lachie's measure. A blow from her scythe came close to taking his head off, and her longblade opened his forearm to the bone. Strong as he was, fighting alone, Kestrel would've proved his match.

"But Lachie fought not alone that night.

"I'd asked her how she could still hold faith in God after all she'd suffered. She'd asked how I could doubt it. I'll never forget that moment. And with men and coldbloods screaming and dying all around her, Charlotte raised that simple wheel of hand-carved rowan wood about her throat in one hand, stepping toward Kestrel without fear.

"*'The Lord is my shield unbreakable!* '

"The vampire hissed, hand raised against the light of Charlotte's faith. Lachlan smashed Kestrel's guard aside, delivering a blow fierce enough to shatter her plate. His greatsword bit deep into her flesh but then snapped, sparks flying, Kestrel staggering.

"'Charli, I told ye to stay back!'

"'And I told *you,* Lachlan á Craeg! I stand with you to the end!'

"He met her eyes, alight with love. A single perfect moment in all that horror.

"*'And I told thee. This* be *the end.*'

"The scythe sang as it came, hurled from Kestrel's outstretched hand. The light from that wheel was blinding, but it made Charlotte an easy target in all that dark. My cousin was many things, Historian; bold and bright and battle-hard. But she was no paleblood. That dreadful scythe struck home, sinking deep into her chest, far, *far* too deep, Lachlan roaring her name as she fell, cleaved open like a doe on the butcher's hook.

"Lachlan *screamed*. Fury. Heartbreak. Madness unbound. He'd never even kissed a girl before her. And he threw himself at Kestrel then, utterly unmoored. Our training to keep the Voss from our heads was drilled into us as boys in San Michon, simple at its heart—fill your mind with noise and nonsense, think not of your intent lest they sense it. But lost in his rage as he was, all discipline abandoned, Kestrel could read my old 'prentice now.

"I dragged myself off the ice, snorting a draft of sanctus right from the vial, trying to raise my blade.

"'L-Lachie!'

“He paid no heed, greatsword snapped in two, his broken heart aflame. But the Iron Maiden was cold as ice. Hard as stone. Swift as silver. I cried out as her longblade found his belly, spilling his guts across the snow. I staggered forward, desperate now, tears freezing in my lashes as he twisted, blood spilling down his legs, trying to hold his insides inside him.

“Kestrel raised her sword.

“Lachie met my eyes then. Across those thousand miles between us. I’d raised him up from a pup. Rescued him from darkness. And in that darkest hour, he looked to me again. The brother who’d saved him, and had been saved in kind.

“But h-he was too far.”

The Last Silversaint hung his head. Tears falling as he stared into those dark waters.

“He w-was too far away.”

Silence fell in the cell of Sul Adair. Jean-François felt the familiar poison of sarcasm bubbling behind his teeth, a cutting barb just a breath away. But looking to Gabriel, gaze downturned as his tears fell, the historian could summon little will to twist the knife.

Besides, he had a more valuable vein to unearth.

“And Aaron?” he asked mildly, glancing to Celene.

“*Hast thou not wondered?*” the Liathe replied. “*The* real *reason?*”

The question echoed in the cell.

In Jean-François’s head.

Pale hands trembling with anticipation.

“So Morgane had asked the Lord of fallen Aveléne,” Celene said. “And though he knew the Prince of Forever was both his enemy and a liar, truth was, of course he had wondered. We *all* had. What *was* Dior to Fabién? A distant relative, perhaps. A thorn in his side, certainly. Famille meant much to the Forever King, oui. But *why* had Fabién been willing to give *so much* to own her?

“Yet Aaron shook his head as Morgane asked her question.

“‘*Dead tongues heeded are Dead tongues tasted.*’

“‘*Wouldst thou taste mine, Aaron de Coste?* ’ Morgane ran her hands over the translucent lace of her dress, the curves and shadows beyond. ‘*Taste more of me? Thou art young in the blood. Yet possessed of a man’s hungers. And thou hast supped not of thy husband in moons for fear of breaking him.*’

“Aaron was backing away now, carrying Patience, dragging the wounded Baptiste.

“‘Stay out of my head, whore.’

“‘*What if thy husband were unbreakable?* ’ Morgane asked, slinking through the dark behind. ‘*His heart iron, his flesh marble, his body able to withstand the murderous passion in thee? I see the shadows of the Blackheart’s boudoir on thy soul, Aaron. Know I, what ye did.*’

"'… What do you mean unbreakable?' Baptiste asked.

"'Listen to not a word she speaks, love.'

"But the blackthumb ignored his husband's snarl, eyes on Morgane.

"'What do you *mean,* madame?'

"The Prince's eyes flickered to the blackthumb's, ruby lips curled. '*How was it that the first vampires were made, Baptiste son of Ismael? How did we come to be?* '

"'The Redeemer. With his dying breath, he cursed the ones who killed—'

"'*Not his dying breath. What were his* words, *Baptiste?* '

"'Don't listen to her, love,' Aaron hissed.

"Baptiste lifted burning torch in bloody hand, whispering.

"'By this blood shall they have life eternal.'

"'*His* blood. *The same holy blood that flows in that child's veins.*'

"'You can use it…' Baptiste realized, his pulse unmoored. 'To *grant* the dark gift, just as the Redeemer did. No caprice of luck. No roll of the dice or threat of decay. You can use it to make vampires of whoever you choose.'"

Jean-François lifted his eyes from the page, fixed now on Celene.

"My God…" he breathed.

But heedless of the historian's elation, the Liathe charged on.

"'*Not I,*' Morgane replied. '*My dark father alone knows the how of it. The ritual through which forever might be gifted. The place in which that door might be unlocked. And e'en now, he reaches out to seize the key. Lachance will be his. The power to bestow eternity with her. All shall kneel.*' The Prince of Forever lifted one pale hand, beckoning. '*Come back to the fire, Baptiste. Bring thy love and my sister both. Come back to forever.*'

"'Forever…'

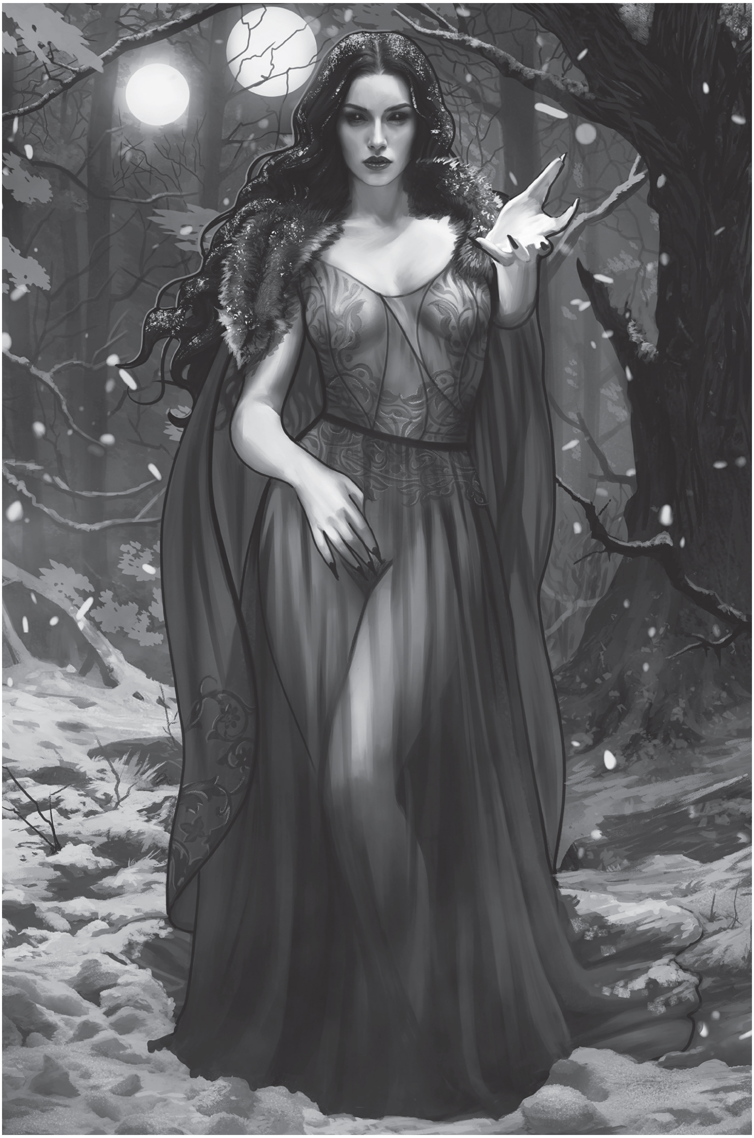
"Baptiste looked to his husband. To the love that cruel fate had denied. His lip trembled, tears rising, the words he had spoken to my brother ringing in his mind.

"*What do you think will happen to our love when I'm fifty?*

"*When I'm seventy?*

"'Aaron…'

"*You think he'll love me then?*



"'You Voss.' Aaron glowered at Morgane, jaw clenched. 'You think forever a prize. And all of us for sale. You call yourself royal. You name yourself high. But look around at the ruin you have made of this realm, *Majesty*. You are carrion eaters, one and all. Bottom-feeders and maggots. And I will be damned if I allow you to damn my beloved beside me.'

"Quick as flies, Aaron snatched the burning torch from his husband's hand, hurled it at Morgane. She was quick enough to step aside, but the long train of her gown moved not so swift as she, and in a blinking, the cloth was ablaze. The vampire shrieked—centuries her tally, but still, all kith fear fire, hungry tongues licking at translucent lace.

“And husband on his arm, my niece on his shoulder, Aaron ran.”

XIV

SHARP AS THREE SWORDS

“PHOEBE WAS DEAD. Charlotte was dead. Lachlan was dead. And the fight in me almost died with them.”

Gabriel frowned, his one good eye drifting to the chymical globe—the only light in the cell save the flickering flames in the hands of the thralls. That pale moth was beating its wings upon the glass again; drawing pointless, endless circles on the glowing surface.

“There’s only so much weight one set of shoulders can carry, Historian. And as my brother fell to Kestrel’s steel, I admit, I almost buckled. But though you’ll think me a madman, still, amid all that blood and loss, I felt my bride with me in that moment. I *swear* it. Real as this stone under my feet, I felt Astrid’s breath on my cheek. Her hand on my shoulder. Her warmth at my back. *God,* I wanted to join her. Just close my eyes and *sleep*. But she spoke then, just as she’d done when I’d fallen at the river. Two words that bid me stagger toward my foe with sword yet in hand.

“Two little words.

“*Not yet.*

“Kestrel stood amid the storm, foulbloods and soldiers crashing all around us. The men of León had seen their Baronne fall, and they were come to frenzy now, old grizzled Lieutenant Mathieu roaring for them to fight on. ‘*Vengeance!* ’ he cried. ‘*For blood and fire and ruin!* ’ But all knew the Prince was mine alone. She stood wreathed in falling ash, steam rising from the canal behind her, flicking a sluice of my brother’s blood from her blade.

“‘*Time to join thy bride, Lion.*’”

“Aaron and Baptiste had run,” Celene said. “Limping on through the night, away from the Ironheart court on their heels. They had reached the Béni now, Augustin burning in the distant east, the promise of dawn on the horizon. The riverbanks here were stone, not mud; broken bluffs spilling forty feet to the frozen surface below. Aaron planted Patience in the snow, met his beloved’s eyes.

“‘Can you climb?’

“The blackthumb shook his head, hand to his wounded leg, boot filling slow with blood. ‘You’ll have to go f-first. I’ll throw Patience, then jump afterward.’

“Aaron nodded, turning toward the fall. But Baptiste touched his arm.

“‘Promise to catch m-me?’

“Aaron smiled then, dragging Baptiste in for a fierce kiss.

“‘*Always,* mon amour.’

“Turning, Aaron flung himself into the night. The drop was long, but the river was frozen deep near the shoreline, the ice crunching as the lordling landed like an anvil. Turning swift, he looked to the bluff above.

“‘Throw her down!’

“But Baptiste held still, bloodless as he looked upon his love.

“‘Baptiste, throw her, quickly!’ Aaron cried.

“‘I’m sorry, mon cher,’ the blackthumb whispered.

“Aaron’s eyes grew wide, lips parting, heart breaking into splinters. Behind Baptiste, figures were coalescing out of the snow and dark; highbloods of Voss’s court, all dagger smiles and soulless stares. And at their head, his fifthborn child, her lace dress in ashen tatters, but her iron flesh yet unmarred.

“‘*Name me whore?* ’ Morgane smiled. ‘*With thine own beau so cheaply bought?* ’

“‘No,’ Aaron whispered. ‘Oh, *no…*’

“‘They can give us what we wanted, Aaron!’ Baptiste called.

“‘But at what price?’ Aaron cried.

“‘I don’t *care*! Don’t you see, we can be together now!’

“‘I’ll not see you damned, love!’

“‘And I’ll not sit by watching *your* love wither as I do!’ Baptiste clenched his jaw, tears in his eyes. ‘Fate has sought to part us, and time will take its due! But if I’m like you, none of that will matter! Don’t you understand what they’re offering us? No weak promises, no empty platitudes. *Forever,* Aaron! A *real* forever! You and me!’

“‘No,’ Aaron moaned, bloody tears spilling down his cheeks.

“‘I love you!’

“‘Oh, my sweet Baptiste, *no*.’

“Morgane stood behind Baptiste now, thrallswords about her, Patience in their clutches. The vampire rested her chin on the blackthumb's shoulder, slipped her arms about his waist, looking down at Aaron. And I recalled my brother's words to Dior then.

"*These vipers turn the best of us against ourselves.*

"*It's what they do.*

"*It's what they are.*

"'Come with us!' Baptiste called, hand outstretched. 'Come with me, Aaron!'

"Aaron looked to the east. The burning city and promised dawn. We could feel the torment in him. The dread. We knew he'd contemplated all his husband had spoken of—the torture of watching his love slowly die, in the flesh as well as his heart. To embrace the dark within him was a fate Aaron de Coste had resisted with all his strength.

"But it *was* within him.

"*I enjoyed it, Gabriel.*

"*I* reveled *in it.*

"So he'd spoke to my brother, those words echoing in his mind now along with the memories of the Blackheart's boudoir, the atrocities he had committed within. Those sins, and the darkness that drove him to them, not yet reckoned with.

"And looking up at his beloved, Aaron sank to his knees."

Gabriel de León pursed his lips, looking down into his empty cup.

"Kestrel had been blooded by Lachlan, left arm cracked to the bone. But Phoebe's blood was all that kept me upright, and I was down to my last drop. As we clashed, I could feel the Maiden trying to pierce my thoughts, even as her blade tried to pierce my guard. But the sword I fought with was simple silver, taken from some nameless fallen soldier. And the first decent strike I made to Kestrel's wounded wing, the fucking thing shattered.

"I clawed at her face, trying to boil her blood. But she'd seen what I'd done to Ettiene at San Maximille, and stepping back, she smashed my shattered blade away.

"The sword went flying across the bloody cobbles, leaving me with nothing. Like a viper uncoiling, Kestrel struck. *Head, chest, head, belly,* longblade ablur. And in my desperation, I reached to my belt and drew the only weapon I had.

"*Live esh'nadai-dov nem da.*

"*Four tablespspspspoons of b-b-b-bbutter.*

"*Me theytheythey I we.*

"Such was her silver song, stammering in my head. But though I dared not risk her on Kestrel's flesh, Ashdrinker served at least to fend off the Maiden's strikes. I could hear cannon barking, men roaring, Kestrel and I dancing through the tumbling embers, the pale pall of vapor now slinking over the crossroads. I fancied it morning mist at first—the sweet promise of sunrise.

But looking east, though the horizon was beginning to burn, I realized the vapor was rising from the canal; waters steaming in that wintersdeep chill.

"And the steam was … *thickening.*

"Kestrel's blade struck Ash, bringing me back to the here and now.

"'*My father wanted thee for his own, Lion.*'

"Her blade skimmed past my cheek.

"'*Wonder I, what Charbourg might have made of thee.*'

"Her feint set me stumbling, breath hissing through my teeth.

"'*Pity we shall never know.*'

"And with a hiss, she lashed out with her boot at my chest.

"The impact was thunder, tearing that half-healed wound open once more. I skidded across frozen stone, tumbling to rest at the canal's edge, breath knocked loose from bleeding lungs. Scrabbling for my fallen sword, I struggled to rise as Lieutenant Mathieu howled my name, soldiers roaring in the city beyond.

"*Live esh'nadai-dov nem da!* Ash cried.

"*Four tabletablespoons of butter.*

"*Me theyth—*

"Kestrel's boot came down on my hand, crushing it and pinning Ash to the stone. The Maiden loomed over me, sword dripping with Lachie's blood. Dawn light was breaking the horizon now, a halo behind her head as she stared down with nothing close to pity.

"'*Kiss my Ettiene godmorrow in hell.*'

"She raised her blade.

"'I'm s-sorry, Dior.'

"But that blow never fell.

"Kestrel frowned, the blood-drenched façade of her face cracking. She looked to her hand, lips peeling back from her fangs. From within the Maiden's armor, smoke was rising now, and looking on in wonder, I saw her marble skin was darkening, *hissing,* like a cutlet of fresh chicken tossed on a skillet. She looked to me, black eyes growing wide, spitting, '*What sorcerie be this?* ' and as she staggered back, gasping, clawing at her armor, her throat, I recognized the note in her cracking voice.

"*Pain.*

"She was *burning,* I realized. Smoke rising, flesh charring, skin cracking. For one beautiful, delirious moment, I looked eastward, thinking it some fucking miracle from the God who'd never cared—that after decades of daysdeath, the strength of the sun had been restored. But the light cresting the horizon was as frail as it had been for years. And I realized it wasn't *sunlight* burning the Iron Maiden black.

"Kestrel screamed, and with one last glance to me, she turned and fled. All around me, I saw a similar tale—the foulbloods fighting those brave men of León were burning now, Dead skin blackening, bubbling, splitting. The cries from the city beyond were rising, louder than wind or thunder. And I realized it wasn't the roar of battle I heard."

The Last Silversaint shook his head and smiled.

"They were *cheering,* Marquis. Those soldiers torn and bleeding. Those citizens but a breath from death. Whatever I was seeing at those crossroads was happening all over Augustin. That rolling mist, spilling over the Heart of Elidaen, burning the Dead within.

"And I somehow knew then. What it was I saw.

"No miracle from God, nor heavensent reprieve.

"On shaking legs I rose, looking to the sky as I whispered.

"'*Dior.*'"

"The steam."

Jean-François looked back and forth between the siblings, lips curling.

"Lachance was yet in the ironworks. The temperature in the canals raised to boiling at her order. The pumpworks prayed over by her gaggle of holy fools. For what is steam but vapored water? And if that water were blessed…"

Gabriel smiled then, chuckling despite it all.

"Sharp as three swords," the Marquis breathed.

"In the Guild Quarter," Celene said, "that vapor was blinding now, rising so thick it filled La Rivière de Fer and the pumpworks both. We had been forced to retreat, lest we suffer the same fate as the rest of the Dead, climbing to the rooftops of the 'works to watch that holy pall spill through the streets below. Dior stood beside us, Prince Philippe at her right hand, a cadre of bodyguards and Unbound around them.

"And together, we watched the Endless Legion burn.

"Thousands. *Tens* of thousands. Wretched in such numbers they might have made this whole world a grave. But now, they were themselves undone. Waters blessed by servants of God, broken into vapor and boiling up from the canals, unmaking all the Forever King had made. The stench of the charnel house swallowed by the rank perfume of burning meat. The screams of terror and pain swallowed by the guns and howls of …

"'Victory,' Philippe declared. 'My God, Dior…'

"Joaquin shook his head and whispered. 'You did it.'

"She looked to the folk around her, winking. '*We* did it, M. Marenn.'

"'Merci, saint-père.' Face turned to heaven, hand to heart, we breathed. 'Merci.'

"Dior looked down on the city, eyes bright with worry.

"'We need to find Gabe.'

"'We could take to the wing,' I offered. 'But the steam…'

"'We'll go,' Joaquin said. 'Sherrod, Cal, Snots, with me. Rest of you stay here.'

"The Unbound nodded, closing in about their savior, vigilant even in triumph. The houndboy bowed to his Grail, dashing off with his fellows as Philippe looked to his bride.

"'We should seek my mother. The Empress must be informed.'

"'In a moment.'

"The Grail turned back to the city below and smiled.

"'I want to remember this.'

"We stood beside her, staring over the city. The grey pall and red snow. The enemies fallen and soldiers victorious. The bewildered living and the grateful dead. Sunlight was at last cresting the horizon, the brittle light of a daysdeath dawn spilling through the mists. The voices in us were whispering, indistinct, and though we reached for Wulfric, he made no reply. We wondered what he thought of what we'd done.

"What we would be now.

"'You saved my life.'

"We looked to Dior as she spoke. Pale eyes on bloodied Augustin.

"'But that one life cost thousands more.'

"'And in the end,' we replied, 'it saved this whole empire.'

"'I'm still not sure how to feel about that, Castia.'

"'Have no fear. God will judge us all in the end.'

"*'Not all of us, Esani.'*

"Those words struck our heart, freezing whatever was left of our blood. The men about us cried out in horror, a cold creeping upon us like the dawn of wintersdeep. And turning, we found one colder still at our backs, smiling at us fondly.

"*'Only those of us foolish enough to die.'*"

The Last Liathe shivered, arms wrapped about herself as if in memory of his chill.

"It was *him,*" she said. "Eldest of the Ironhearts. Architect of daysdeath. He was clad in that same pale silk brocade, spattered now with blood and ash. And though his visage still retained its terrible beauty, we saw his flesh—unchangeable, invulnerable—was no longer flawless marble, but blistered and cracked, like leather left too long in the sun. He had made his way here, through that pall of holy water, across the war-torn city to her side. And though it had claimed his army, her ploy had not claimed him.

"Black eyes fell on Dior. The Grail took one step back.

"*'What joy,'* Fabién said. '*That we should meet in flesh at last.*'

"'How the hell did you find me?' Dior breathed.

"*'The eyes that spy 'pon me, see also thee.'* His gaze fell on us, smile fading. '*Ye be not so tiny nor clever as ye suppose, sanguimancer.*'

"Our belly rolled then. Voss must have sensed my mote in his command tent, and somehow, through us, sensed Dior. Was it because I was of his line? Because he was the eldest kith upon this cold earth? We realized we had *no* idea of the limit of the Forever King's gifts, then. No clue what this monster was truly capable of.

"Voss turned to Dior, pale hand outstretched.

"*'Come with me, child.'*

"'For the Grail!'

"The Unbound roared as one, silver blades raised. They had walked with her through hell, remember. Been rescued from the same by her hand. They would *never* let her be taken by its servant. And though Dior cried '*NO,*' still they charged—the Callums and Boyds and Declans—loyal to their ends. Philippe's men charged with them, the name of their Prince and God upon their lips. And to a man, Fabién Voss slaughtered them.

"Every. Single. One.

"I had never seen such power. Swords splintered upon his skin. His hands parted flesh like water. Moving so swift he belied the eye. And where in one moment had stood threescore men, brave and faithful to their last, there now were only corpses, scattered across the rooftop in steaming, bloody pieces.

"I roared at Dior again to *RUN,* and she looked over the railing to the cobbles, four long stories below. Her eyes went to her fallen men. To her brave and handsome Prince yet standing. Tears freezing in her lashes as she drew her silver dagger from her belt. With broken nails I sliced my blackened palms open, summoning what little blood I'd left within me. But he was on us then, *God,* so swift, so strong.

"First of the Five.

"Maker of my maker.

"He was a good man, Prince Philippe. A brave man, and true. I think he would have made the finest emperor this realm had known in generations. But as he stepped forward to defend the girl he loved not as a bride, yet loved all the same, he was left stumbling as his silver sword shattered on Fabién's flesh, gargling as the remainder was pushed back, back almost *gently,* up through his mouth and out the top of his skull.

"And silently, the last son of House Augustin fell.

"We struck at Voss, he stepped aside, smooth as millpond water. Dior screamed in rage and hatred; blooding her blade on her mangled palm, she lunged at Fabién too. Effortless, the Forever King stopped the blow, catching her wrist and drawing her close.

"*'What miracles we shall make.'*

"She slapped him, bloodied palm across his cheek, and at the touch of her holy blood, fire bloomed on that immortal flesh. Rippling needles of red formed in the droplets, hanging poised in the air. But with a snarl, he slapped her back, vicious, drawing yet more blood, his hand *and* face now aflame. The blow was enough to break Dior's jaw, head snapping back on her neck, and senseless, the Holy Grail of San Michon fell.

"We roared, lunging at Fabién's spine. But we felt him then, like a knife in our mind, a splinter in our souls, seeing our strikes before ever they fell.

Turning, he plunged his burning hand through our mangled throat, drowning those holy flames in our flesh. Seizing hold our tongue, he *pulled,* dragging us past him now, through the iron balustrade of the rooftop's edge. And ripping both jaw and tongue free, he sent us sailing out into the storm.

"We fell.

"Four stories down into that burning cloud of holy steam.

"We saw him claw his face, dousing the flames with our blood.

"We saw him stoop to lift Dior from the stone.

"And then we burst apart."

XV

TREACHERY'S FRUIT

"IT WAS NEAR dusk before I made sense of what the hell had happened."

Gabriel's stare was fixed across the river, locked on his sister.

"Lieutenant Mathieu had taken charge of Charlotte's body, Lachie, and the other fallen, beginning the grim task of tallying the slain. But a handful of lads in León colors came with me as I went in search of Dior. The slow chill of shock was sinking into the city's bones, and the ironworks were still burning hot, that blessed steam rolling through those streets now so thick I couldn't see but two feet in front of my face. I was all out of sanctus, still too wounded to move quickly or well, and it was near noon before Joaquin and his fellows found me blundering among the carnage in the noble quarter.

"'Chevalier, thank God,' the lad gasped, bending double. 'I've been searching f—'

"'Where's Dior?'

"'In the ironmonger's w—'

"'No shit, pigdick, where the *fuck* are they? I can't see *anything* in this soup!'

"'Follow me.'

"And so I did, stumbling about for another *hour* behind the houndboy until I was almost ready to throttle him. But finally, we bumbled our way into the Guild Quarter, and from there, even blind, I basically knew the way. The wind was still blowing, deathly chill, and the fog over Augustin was beginning to lift as we finally spotted it, towering above those bloody streets like a silent headstone—the marvel that was La Rivière de Fer.

"The building was surrounded by chevaliers of the crown and men in golden tabards, a great gaggle of commonfolk and guildsmen. Pushing my way through the crush, I saw a familiar figure, clad in torn mail and a tabard of bloody blue.

"'Survived, Fontaine? Lucky for us.'

"Duke Maarten's face darkened at the sight of me, the lips I'd split parted in a snarl.

"'I should see you hanged for insubordination, bastard.'

"'The soldiers I saved at Lastbridge might sing different. And the princess who saved us all *definitely* will.'

"Maarten's face dropped at that, eyes downturned. I looked about me and saw the grim expressions among the soldiery, commonfolk weeping, belly running cold.

"'What's happened?' I whispered.

"And Maarten told me.

"Isabella was in the throne room when I found her. She'd dismissed all save her personal guards, but they were wise enough to let me pass once they saw the look on my face. The Empress stood with her back to me, looking out of a tall window on the broken city she yet ruled; a portrait framed in faint soot-stained light.

"She didn't even turn as I entered.

"Isabella de Augustin had the seeming of a goddess when I'd first met her. A sixteen-year-old cub I was. She'd arrived at San Michon at the head of her army, clad in a golden gown and silver breastplate; the mother of empire, dressed for war. I could still feel her blade kissing my shoulders as she'd declared me Sword of the Realm before all my brethren. That was still one of the proudest moments of my life. I'd served her faithfully for five years afterward, the sword she'd gifted me singing in my hand.

"Isabella's Lion.

"I'd come to know my Empress well during my service. And after a few too many wines and a few too many victory feasts, I'd glimpsed the woman behind the royal façade. Despite the fact she'd been behind Astrid's banishment from court, I'd even come to think of her as a sort of friend. Isabella loved her people. Her husband, in her way. Most of all, she loved her children. But she was prideful, my friend. Vain. She nursed grudges like a beggar his beer, and stood before her now, I knew she was still angry with me.

"We'd never spoken after my excommunication.

"After I'd abandoned loyalty for love.

"'Empress.'

"Isabella turned as I spoke, and I saw she was weeping. I'd *never* seen her do that, not in all my time as her sword. And as she swept toward me, throwing trembling arms about me, she collapsed in heaving sobs, fighting just to breathe.

"'G-Gabriel…'

"'I'm sorry, Bella.'

"'Gabriel, h-he … oh my p-poor Philippe…'

"'I know,' I whispered, holding her tight. 'I know, Bella. I'm so sorry.'"

The Last Silversaint hung his head.

"What a waste of breath. What a weak and worthless nothing is the word *sorry* at a time like that. *Sorry* doesn't bring back your children, Historian. *Sorry* is the thing we say when there is nothing *to* say, but silence feels a sin. We say sorry to comfort ourselves, not the ones we say it to. And I knew it, too. So I shut my fucking mouth and stood with my old friend in my arms, and let her weep for her murdered son.

"But in the end …

"'Bella, I need horses. Supplies.'

"My old friend looked up at that, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"'… W-why?'

"'He's taken her. Voss. He's *taken* Dior, Bella. I need to run him down before—'

"'You…'

"The arms she'd thrown about me fell away, and she backed off, whispering.

"'You … *dare* speak to me of Dior Lachance?'

"Isabella bared her teeth, the bloodshot sapphire of her eyes ablaze.

"'That serpent? That treacherous, poisonous, pompous little *cunt*? She who lied with every breath she could muster to worm her way into my son's arms? Philippe *died* defending her, Gabriel! Slaughtered like some hog on a hook! Do you understand what that means? The line of Maximille the Conqueror is *ended because of HER*!'

"'And I go to end the one who extinguished it!'

"I reached for her hands, but she snatched them away.

"'Voss is *weak,* Bella! His legion gone, his children slain! If *ever* we had a chance to end him, it's now! I already have the men! *Thousands* of soldiers in de León colors with a hell of a score to settle. Give us horses to run him down and I swear—'

"'You *swear*?'

"Bitter laughter turned to a snarl.

"'You *SWEAR*? You, who swore to love God and no other? To serve the realm before himself? What then is it worth, the troth of a *liar*? A traitor? A whoremonger?'

"'My wife was no—'

"'Astrid Rennier was a viper while she lived here at court, and a viper when she and her slattern mother were banished thereafter! That you were fool enough to bed my husband's bastard speaks only to the sweetness of her venom, and that she tarnished my Sword in her quim bears testament to the treachery in her heart!'

"I clenched my jaw, holding my rebuke behind my teeth.

"'I need horses, Bella.'

"'And *I* needed a Sword who could keep his fool *cock* in his britches! I needed a man who would serve the crown before himself!'

"She shook her head, lip curling.

"'It seems even empresses don't always get what they need. Yet *men* ever seem to.'

"'After all these years…' I shook my head, my voice a whisper. 'You've still not forgiven I chose to stand with Astrid rather than kneel before you. And now you'll let Dior and realm both pay the price for it?'

"'You *betrayed* me. Now taste treachery's fruit.'

"Isabella sniffed hard, pawing the tears from her eyes.

"'We reject your request, Chevalier de León. Augustin has suffered too grievous a blow to spare what you ask. Furthermore, you are forbidden to drain troops from our walls for this fool's gambit, no matter the colors they wear. Our enemy may return, and Augustin's mothers have already given too m-many sons.'

"Her façade almost cracked then. But still, she lifted her chin.

"'We must rebuild. Strike at Voss after we have regained our strength.'

"'By then it w—'

"'The crown has spoken. *Capitaine?*'

"The doors behind me opened at Isabella's call. 'Empress?'

"'Escort the good chevalier out.'

"I searched those sapphire eyes for the woman behind the façade. Any trace of my old friend. But all I found was a mother mourning. A dynast without a dynasty.

"An Empress.

"And bowing low, I marched from the room."

XVI

TOWARD THE FALL

“PEOPLE TALK ABOUT the loyalty of dogs, Historian. But God’s truth, three cheers for horses.”

The silversaint raised his goblet to his lips, only remembering as it arrived that the cup was already empty. And with a heartfelt sigh, he set it aside.

“When I’d walked out onto the Béni the day I’d stolen into the capital, I’d honestly not known if I’d ever return. And so I’d left my brave Argent untethered by the river, the gelding free to wander as he chose. But trudging down those broken banks, the shadow of wounded Augustin behind me, astonishingly, there he was. His hide looked silver in the falling sun, and he snorted for joy when he saw me, stomping one hoof in the snow. Pressing my brow to his, I whispered, my voice near cracking.

“‘Good to have one brother left.’

“‘You have two.’

“I turned at those words, not daring to hope. Yet there he stood, eyes haunted, hands and cheeks smeared with old blood, his great black steed Eclipse at his back. I’d just helped save a city. Rescued thousands from the jaws of death. And still I wondered in that moment what the *hell* I’d done to deserve a friend like him.

“‘Aaron…’

“He embraced me, squeezing so tight, I couldn’t breathe.

“‘Forgive me, brother. God Almighty, I beg you…’

“I looked about us then, heart running cold.

"'Where's Patience? Where's Baptiste?'

"'He has them,' Aaron whispered, his voice trembling. 'Voss has them both. I failed you, Gabriel, God forgive me. I stole Patience away the first chance I had. Baptiste at my side, just as we planned. We reached the river, but they…'

"He shook his head, bloody tears spilling down his cheeks. And he told me then. Of Baptiste's fall to temptation, and the awful truth behind it. The reason why Fabién Voss had pursued Dior across the empire since the moment he learned she lived. The reason he was prepared to sacrifice an army to hold a single girl in his power.

"'What matter a legion of foulbloods?' I breathed. 'If he can make a legion of highbloods to replace them whenever he chooses?'

"I looked to the falling sun, my very bones gone cold.

"'My God, we'll *never* stop him now.'

"'*When*ever he chooses, perhaps,' Aaron said. 'But not *wher*ever, I think. Morgane spoke of it, Gabriel. *The ritual through which forever might be gifted, and the* place *in which that door might be unlocked.* I know not where they are bound, brother, but I think it's only *there* more highbloods might be made.'

"And I remembered then. My waking dream born of Dior's blood.

"That hand, rising above the city where the curse was first laid upon the Five.

"'Charbourg.' I met Aaron's eyes, swallowing hard. 'He's taking her to Charbourg.'

"'That sounds a long ride…'

"I turned at the voice, spotting a figure pushing through snow-clad scrub downriver, a gear-laden horse behind him. He was wrapped head to foot in heavy winter clothing, but I knew him for the twinkle in his dark eyes, the Nordish in his accent.

"'Well, well. Young Joaquin Joaquin Marenn.'

"'I know I said it twice when we met in Maergenn, but it's just *Joaquin*. There's no—'

"'Don't spoil my fun, boy.'

"'I know you,' Aaron frowned. 'You worked the kennels in Aveléne.'

"Joaquin bowed, smiling. 'Good to see you again, Capitaine.'

"I looked the youngblood over, folding my arms slowly. 'Awful chilly out here, M. Marenn. Where you headed in weather so grim?'

"'With you. To save Dior.'

"I raised one brow, eyeing the laden mare behind him. 'Where'd you get the gear?'

"'Dead men. They don't need it. We will.'

"'The Empress has forbidden any man of fighting age to leave Augustin, you realize.'

"'I swore to no Empress, Chevalier,' Joaquin declared. 'I serve Dior

Lachance. And unless you've got a few spare silversaints lying about, or some way to get word to Brynne and the army of the Moonsthrone, I'm about the only help you're likely to get.'

"I glanced to Aaron, who replied with an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

"*Too dangerous,* his eyes told me.

"'You're riding into hell, boy,' I told Joaquin. 'With a vampire, and a vampire's son. You're as like to get ended by wretched as not. And if they don't eat you, we probably will.'

"The former houndboy patted his rump.

"'Then might I suggest you start with my spectacular arse.'

"I couldn't help but chuckle at that. I *did* like the swagger on this lad. Yet the youngblood wasn't smiling anymore, raising forefinger and thumb over his heart.

"'For the Grail, Chevalier.'

"I glanced to Aaron again. Back to Joaquin. And finally looking north, I sighed.

"'For the Grail.'"

Silence fell in the belly of Sul Adair, Jean-François finishing his chapter with a flourish. The historian's belly thrilled with the flights of a thousand butterflies, his hands trembling as he reached into his frockcoat to fetch an ink-stained kerchief.

He *understood*. He understood *at last.*

Why Voss had coveted Lachance.

What role the Grail had played in the Forever King's design.

The power in the Redeemer's blood.

The power to turn kith at will.

The Last Silversaint's gaze was fixed upon that pale moth, tracing its useless courses upon the chymical globe. But Gabriel glanced up now, face crusted with dried blood, frowning as Jean-François began cleaning his quill.

"Going somewhere?"

"I think perhaps we should take a spell," the historian declared, packing away his writing implements. "The Battle of Augustin was a tale long in the telling, and noon has come and gone while you shared it. I have affairs that need tending, and *you* should get something in your belly besides blood and wine, Chevalier."

"Last meal for the condemned? Your concern is touching."

"He's off to sing a lullaby to his Empress of Wolves and Men."

Jean-François looked across the river, bristling. The Liathe was watching from her shadows, black eyes fixed on his, lip curled in a sneer.

"I think perhaps Margot is upset with him. If there is one thing our dear Marquis desires more than the sins of the flesh, it is dear Mama's approval."

"Watch your tongue, whelp."

Celene raised pale hands in surrender, gaze slipping to the fresh torches being handed out among his men.

"You know the Grail's worth now, Marquis," she said. "The truth at the heart of her story. But do you really not wish to know how that story ends?"

"I already *know* how it ends, Mlle Castia. Your brother was kind enough to inform me at the beginning of all this. *The cup is broken. The Grail is gone*."

Celene looked to her brother, black gaze aflame. De León had gone suspiciously silent now, avoiding Jean-François's gaze. He could see the lines of pain carved in the man's features, the set of his shoulders, the dim spark in his eye as Celene whispered.

"Do you not wish to know how he broke it?"

"Go to hell," Gabriel spat, glancing up.

"You have ensured that, brother mine. Sure and true."

"Bull*shit*. You'd earned a hundred eternities in the abyss before I set foot in Talhost."

"Do you fear what they will think of you, Gabriel?" Celene asked. "Those who'll read your tale after you're dead? Pride was always the Black Lion's greatest sin, no? Are you frightened for them to see that in the end you were nothing but a monster like me?"

Fury flashed in the Lion's gaze then, and he rose slowly to his feet.

"I am *nothing* like you."

"That's quite enough, Chevalier," the historian warned.

"You cost us *everything*!" he spat. "Cost *ME* everything, and for what? Every lie you've hissed, every life you've snatched, and what did it get you in the end? A brother who loathes you as much as your worthless fucking God does!"

"Your petty hatred holds no—"

"*Petty?"* He crowed with laughter, bitter and black. "Seven Martyrs, there is *nothing* petty about my hate for you, Celene. Do you not understand that? I don't just want you dead, sister. I wish you'd never been *born*! Every moment of warmth we ever shared is a lie! Every drop of affection I ever had for you is poisoned! And the only thing I have left to live for now is the hope I get to watch you *die before I do*!"

The siblings stood a few feet apart across that river, but the gulf between seemed an ocean. Jean-François was surprised to see bloody tears spilling down the Liathe's cheeks at Gabriel's words. Even more intrigued to note the silversaint seemed near crying himself.

"I pray you get your wish, brother," she whispered.

The silversaint's lip trembled at that, and he withered back into his chair, hand to his bloody brow. Jean-François found himself regarding Celene in silence.

It was true what he'd told her. Though the nature of Lachance's fall was still unknown, the girl was definitely dead—Nicolette had seen her corpse when she captured the ’saint and his sister, testified to the Empress as to the state of it. *Dead as a rather unsightly doorknob,* if he recalled correctly. And now that Jean-François understood Lachance’s power, it mattered little how the girl had met her end. Her value had been in her blood, and that blood was spilled into the earth now; no use in bringing the other lines to heel. *Politics* would have to serve his Empress instead, but she was no novice in that arena. Jean-François was yet certain by convocation’s end, Margot’s reign would be assured.

All that remained was to inform his Empress of the truth. Then perhaps a nice long bath before the evening’s entertainments. But still …

I will *miss this when it’s over.*

He looked to Gabriel, slumped in his chair.

And it will be over very *soon now.*

There was still the question of daysdeath’s birth. The Forever King’s death. A few scant hours remained before the sun set on this pair for the last time, but it would likely be enough to reach this history’s end. And Jean-François supposed if he *was* chronicling the lives of Gabriel de León and Celene Castia, he owed them a decent finale.

“The sun is sinking,” he declared, chin held high. “And I have little desire to hear a full and complete accounting of your brother’s monthslong trek through the wastes of Elidaen in the company of his plucky young houndboy and brooding blood brother. A fellow can only tolerate so many mother jokes.”

Celene sneered, nodding once.

“I can take you swift to Talhost.”

Black eyes fell on the lion.

“I can tell you what he did.”

“And how do you know, Mlle Castia?”

“Because we were there, Marquis. We were there for *all* of it.”

Sighing, Jean-François returned slowly to his seat. With a meaningful stare at the empty bottle, a glance to Dario, he sent the thrall off to fetch another. From his coat, he produced a wooden case carved with two wolves, two moons. Drawing his long quill from within, he placed a fresh bottle upon the armrest of his chair. Dipping quill to ink, Jean-François looked up with dark and expectant eyes.

Celene drew a deep breath, the taste of an ending in the air.

“Finish it,” the vampire said.

BOOK SIX

EMPIRE’S END

Live esh'nadai dov nem da.
Four tablespoons of butter.
Me they I? We us who?

—Ashdrinker, Sword of the Redeemer

I

A LAND GODLESS

“THERE WAS ALMOST nothing left of us after the battle at the ironworks.”

Celene stood with hands clasped behind her, staring at the ceiling.

“As we fell from the roof into that mist of holy water, we’d immediately begun to burn. We had been set aflame before, Historian, but we had never felt a sensation quite like that. It was not the pain of immolation, but the agony of disintegration, and we felt ourself *dissolving* in that roiling fog. Desperately winging skyward, the fear of hellfire driving us on, up, *out*. Only a few motes of us escaped destruction. Perhaps a dozen of a thousand. And with so little of us left, it took months to recover.

“But in those months, we followed my brother.”

The historian drew breath to speak, but the Liathe cut him off.

“I’ll not bore you with their journey, Marquis. I will spare you the tedium of snow and slog, of food and fireside. Of bridges broken and battles with nameless wretched and mile upon mile of drudgery through the ruins Fabién Voss had made of th—”

“For someone claiming to spare me drudgery, mademoiselle,” Jean-François sighed, “this meal you’re serving tastes a *great* deal like it.”

Celene softly scoffed.

“Très bien. It is enough then, to know they moved swift, but their quarry swifter. For while my brother and his band were relentless in their pursuit, they were forced to stop for rest. And while kith too must slumber, the mortal thralls who yet served Forever’s King could drive his convoy onward while the remnants of Voss's court lay their heads down to sleep. In truth, they really stopped only for the sake of their horses.

"The Ironhearts were still forced to ration. Living rough and running hard, like hounds before their masters' whips. We imagine it was quite a change from the high life of the conqueror they'd enjoyed previously. And though none dared speak up, many among Voss's court seemed discontent at these privations. Your dear niece among them."

The Marquis pursed his lips.

"Nicolette still rode with the Forever King, then."

"Oui. Her retainers with her. Though whether she wanted to stay, was afraid to leave, or was simply forced to remain by the Forever King himself, we did not know."

"You witnessed all this?"

"Only at distance. We were painfully aware Voss had sensed us in his tent during the Battle of Augustin, and we had *no* desire to be discovered again. We mostly followed on Gabriel's heels, our body mending slowly. Yet a single mote of us stuck with Voss, following his wagons from far on high. His cadre were perhaps a hundred; a scattering of highbloods, but mostly wretched and thralls. We saw Morgane speaking with her father often, and our niece playing occasionally in the snow with a troubled-looking Baptiste Sa-Ismael. But there was no sign of Kestrel—it seemed the Iron Maiden had been abandoned in Voss's haste to escape and trusted to find her own way home.

"Dior was kept under lock and chain in one of the wagons, guarded day and night. We caught only glimpses of her, but enough to know she lived. And to that promise we held, flying onward, ever onward through that bitter Elidaeni winter.

"Most of the wretched wandering on that road were snatched up by the Forever King to bolster his numbers. The few that slipped past him were quickly slain to slake Aaron de Coste's hungers and Gabriel's now unchecked bloodlust. But we had learned to live on vermin years past, Marquis, on our long road to San Yves. And by the blood of rats and rabbits, Celene Castia's wounds were slowly unwound."

"*Unchecked bloodlust.*"

Chocolat eyes fell on the silversaint.

"Well, that sounds positively titillating."

"It was bad." Gabriel spoke softly, gaze downturned. "*Worse* than bad. I'd been raised on the fear of what palebloods could become when they fell to the thirst, but the horror stories the seraphs told us back in San Michon couldn't hold a candle to the reality. The sangirè was a presence, Historian. A poison, burning constant in my veins. The sacrament did near nothing to fend it off anymore. Aaron and I would share any wretched we found, and after a while, I'd abandoned almost any pretense of gathering their blood for my pipe, drinking straight from their rotten veins instead.

“We’d feed together, far from Joaquin, intent at least to spare the boy the horror of what I was becoming. The promise Aaron had made—the vow he’d do what needed to be done for me at the end—echoed ever in my head. I knew the fate awaiting me now. Knew the sins I’d committed to get this far. But I was at least comforted that *Aaron* knew too, and yet didn’t judge me for them. He’d sins of his own, after all. I’d fought beside thousands of men in hundreds of battles, but I think none understood me quite like Aaron de Coste.”

“And so.” Jean-François waved one hand, impatient. “Months. Miles. And finally…”

“Talhost.”

Celene’s voice rang in the darkness, cold as ice.

“I had heard tell of those lands, of course. The frozen barrens beyond the Godsend Mountains. The great wilds where the One Faith barely held sway. He’d set out to bring the word of his Father to those wastes, and in the end, Talhost had even killed the *Redeemer*.

“Our home of Nordlund was untamed country, Marquis. Violent country. We Nordish prided ourselves on being hard people, raised in harder climes. But the arms of the Augustin Empire were long, and though they struggled at first, the sons and grandsons of Maximille the Martyr *had* brought civilization to the lands of my birth. To the jagged coasts of Ossway in the west. The vast plains of Sūdhaem to the south. But north…”

The Liathe shook her head.

“No word had been heard out of Talhost since the Forever King conquered Vellene decades past. And walking those wilds, we began to understand why.

“Talhost was frozen country, Marquis. Cruel country. But above all, it felt like … *haunted* country. Storms raged so brutal and black that day and night were one and the same. The air reeked of brimstone, poisonous, bitter on the tongue. Freezing winds blew ceaselessly, and I swear God, at their edge, it seemed a *singing* could be heard. Figures flitted at the corners of the eye, vanishing when looked upon direct. The wasted trees had bent double over decades of freezing gales, dead branches seeming to whisper your name as you passed. Your failures. Your sins. No warmth. No light. No joy. The annals and histories in the great libraries of Augustin spoke that Talhost was part of the empire, oui.

“But if so, this was empire’s end.”

The historian turned on the silversaint.

“Rather dramatic, no?”

“I never thought I’d hear myself say it, coldblood. But my sister speaks truth. In times before empire, the great spine of granite in the west of Nordlund was said to mark the edge of civilization. Each mountain in that range was named for an angel of the heavenly host, but the range itself was called the Godsend, as if even the sovereign of heaven wanted no part in what lay beyond. And riding past the silent ruins of Charinfel—the great fortress that once guarded the southern pass into Nordlund—I understood."

The Last Silversaint met the historian's eyes.

"Talhost was a land godless.

"We rode in pursuit of our quarry, brave Argent beneath me, Ashdrinker sleeping at my waist. Aaron rode at my right hand, faithful as always. But I have to tell you, even Aaron's faith paled beside that of young Joaquin Marenn.

"When the houndboy asked to accompany us, Aaron wanted to tell him no—Joaquin was from Aveléne, and Aaron still felt responsible for the boy's life. Truth told, I only agreed because I supposed Joaquin would last a few days before breaking, fucking off back to Augustin and leaving his supplies behind. Aaron was a vampire, and I paleblooded, and we rode hard, Chastain. But not a single word of complaint had slipped the youngblood's lips through those long months. And more, he'd kept pace.

"Kept faith.

"But faith won't fill an empty belly, Historian. Belief won't slake your thirst. The deeper into Talhost we rode, the harder it was to scrounge. No game. No wretched. Some days we struggled to find trees for firewood. Our supplies were down to crumbs, our strength dwindling day by day.

"And as strength failed, the sangirè grew.

"I was dreaming of it now. Sweet Odette in León. Dear Phoebe in my tent at San Maximille. The soldiers and camphands who'd vanished during those 'wretched attacks' on the march to Elidaen. The taste never forgot. The hole never filled. Every time I looked at Joaquin, I could see the traceries of veins beneath his skin, the *warmth* they promised, red rivers leading to an ocean in which I might drown this godforsaken inferno in my belly.

"I knew what was coming. Part of me wanted to warn the boy."

The silversaint shook his head.

"But not all of me.

"The map I guided us by wasn't the best, but far as I could tell, we were a fortnight from the Charbourg. Through a break in the weather, I'd spotted the shadow of the Zamesk Mountains on our southern flank—those same peaks I'd seen in that waking dream. I could spy no great black hand rising above them, but as we followed westward, we noted a strangeness on the horizon. Beyond the reek of sulfur and ash, the trembling of the earth beneath us, the tang of black smoke turning the snows to grey, there seemed the light of a false dawn ahead. Smeared across the westward skyline, no matter the hour.

"And toward that baleful glow, we set our tread.

"The skies above ran black now. No hint of sunlight. Darkness forever. We'd found shelter inside a small cave in the Zamesk foothills. And while young Joaquin huddled with our beasts, Aaron and I had gone in search of wretched. We hunted hours to no avail, splitting up in the end to cover more ground. My thirst was…”

Gabriel gritted his teeth, his one good eye narrowed.

“Martyrs, there’s just no fucking words for it. You know what I mean, Chastain. We three *all* know what it means. A pain so awful that death seems a mercy. A beast made all the more hateful by the knowledge that even if you sate it, it’ll just want *more*.

“I even tried feeding on myself, weeping as I chewed and suckled at my own wrist. But you can’t steal what you already own, vampire. It was just as my stepfather told me when I was a boy. *There’s a beast in all men’s blood, Gabriel. You can starve him. Cage him. Curse him. But in the end, you pay the beast his due*.”

Three voices murmured then, down in that dark.

“*Or he takes his due from you*.”

Jean-François looked up at a heavy thumping on the door. Young Dario had departed some time before, returning now with the repast he’d been sent to fetch. The boy placed a new bottle of warm blood, two fresh goblets, and a platter of potatoloaf upon the table, smiling as Jean-François caressed his thigh in thanks. Eyeing the bread with disgust, the silversaint cracked the bottle without asking, drank from the neck while ignoring the historian’s goblet completely.

“Joaquin was tending the fire when I finally returned,” he said. “I’d spent *hours* hunting in that dark, finding no drop to drink, wretched, rabbit, or otherwise. The houndboy glanced up from the flames as I stumbled inside, blanching at the sight of me.

“‘Seven Martyrs, you look like hammered shite.’

“‘I heard no complaints from your mama.’”

Jean-François rolled his eyes and glanced to Celene, but the silversaint spoke on.

“‘Come sit by the fire,’ Joaquin told me. ‘You look near frozen to death.’

“I huddled by the miserable little blaze, my veins burning twice as bright. My hands were clasped about my aching belly, and mistaking thirst for hunger, Joaquin nodded to the thin soup of dried mushrooms he’d been preparing.

“‘It’ll be ready in a minute.’

“‘I’d rather chew my own salted arsehole.’

“‘You must eat something.’

“‘Shut your noise-hole, boy, you’re not my fucking wife.’

“The lad looked wounded, went back to slicing the fungus, sprinkling the pot with a fingerful of spice from a near-empty pouch. And just to quell the kicked-puppy expression he was wearing, I ended up pouring myself a bowlful. The soup was nothing close to the thing I needed, but it was hot at least, my hands shaking as I quaffed the lot.

"'Not bad,' I grunted, wiping my chin.

"Joaquin scoffed. 'It's shite, but merci. I don't have most of the ingredients anymore, but it's usually a fine recipe. Isla taught it to me, back when…'

"He fell silent then, gazing into the fire. He'd mentioned the name once or twice, but it wasn't my business to ask. I spoke only to fill the quiet. Keep my mind off blood.

"'She was your g-girl?'

"He nodded, eyes still on those flames. 'Died in Maergenn. Kiara killed her.'

"'Take comfort, then. The Wolfmother sleeps well in h-hell.'

"Joaquin nodded again, voice gone wistful. '*Ever After*. That's what Isla used to call me. Her *Happy Ever After*. I don't suppose I'll get one of those now.'

"'Nobody does. Not in this story.'

"'Dior, maybe?'

"I frowned, red knives in my belly. And though I tried, I couldn't quite hold my temper anymore. 'What the *fuck* are you still doing here, boy? Why'd you come so far for that girl? You're not fool enough to have fallen in love with her, are you?'

"'No. I mean … not like that.'

"'Then what the hell is she to you?'

"Joaquin shrugged then. Spoke the simplest truth.

"'Hope.'

"The boy went back to chopping fare for the pot, and I studied him in the flickering light. He was a handsome little bastard, even beneath the grime and road soil. But looking past the flash and swagger, I could see it in him, same as I saw in me. This was a lad who'd lost his beloved. His home. His friends. And like a drowner to driftwood, he was holding on to the one thing he had left with all his strength.

"I sighed, ashamed of myself then.

"'You're a good lad, Joaquin Joaquin Marenn.'

"He glanced up, smiling crooked. 'I keep telling you, it's just Joaq—*FUCK*!'

"The scent hit me like a swordblow, stabbing up through my belly, piercing my thrashing heart. Joaquin bent double, clutching his hand, but I could see a sluice of brilliant, *blinding* red on the blade he'd just dropped, a slick on his cutting board. He'd sliced his finger, the fool. A few drops the tally, nothing more. But to me …

"Joaquin hissed, holding his bleeding hand and looking about.

"'Hand me that saddlebag, would…'

"His voice faded, face running bloodless as he saw the look in my eyes. I was on my feet, every muscle taut, every sense on fire. The sight of that wondrous red, slipping down his skin. The sound of it striking stone as it fell, the feel of despair as the ground drank it down, but the scent, God Almighty, that *scent*. It was all I knew in that moment. No thought for after. No pause for reason. It was all I'd ever wanted.

"And I wanted it *now*.

"Joaquin cried out as our bodies collided, as my arms enfolded him, as my fangs sank into his throat. Any resistance faded as the Kiss took hold; that awful bliss, that horrifying elixir of pain and pleasure, shivering him to his core. Every mouthful dragged him closer to murder, and still he threw his arms around me. I drank heedless, no boy in my arms now but only a *bag,* a *bottle,* and one I dove headlong toward the bottom of.

"He was one or two mouthfuls away from *too late* when Aaron grabbed me.

"'Godssakes, Gabriel, *STOP*!'

"My brother tore me loose, red droplets spraying in the air as the horses cried out in terror. But the beast was all I knew, all I was, and I threw myself back at Joaquin, roaring in fury. The lad had collapsed, one hand to his bloodied throat, and I'd have given *everything* in that moment to taste *one more fucking drop*. But Aaron stepped between us, defiant, and moving like silver, he threw his fist into my jaw.

"I flew out through the cave mouth, tumbling down the slope. I'd scrambled back to my feet before I knew it, heedless of the pain, but Aaron plowed into me, knocking my breath loose. We crashed into grey snows, wreathed in the stench of brimstone, brawling like the boys we'd been when first we met. Clenched fists and split knuckles, busted lips and broken teeth. But somewhere in there, I heard him screaming.

"'This isn't you!'

"*'GABRIEL, THIS ISN'T YOU! '*

"I found myself then, clawing back from my brink, sat atop Aaron with hands around his throat. Eyes blurry, heart thrashing, I brought the thing I was becoming to heel. And with a hollow, gut-sick sob, I locked the beast inside the cage once more. It bellowed as it went, blooded but never, *ever* sated, and though I was somehow yet its master, as I locked that door behind it, it turned to gaze on me with my own eyes.

"And it *smiled.*

"I smelled burning skin. Heard sizzling flesh. Looking down, I saw Aaron had drawn Ashdrinker from my sheath. Her broken tip was pressed against my heart, his hand smoking on her hilt.

"'Gabriel?' he whispered.

"I eased off, fell back in the snow, one hand to my thudding brow.

"'Not for much longer.'

"Aaron let go of my blade, his fingers burned into blackened claws, dragging himself up from the snow. With a sigh, I picked up Ash, her voice ringing silver in my head.

"*Live esh'nadai dov-dov-dov nem da.*

"*Four tablespoonsspoons of bubutter.*

"*Me th—*

"Her song fell quiet as I slipped her home, looking now to Aaron.

"'Forgive me, brother.'

"He licked his bloody lips and looked west, the ground rumbling beneath us.

"'Hold on, Gabriel. Not long now.'

"Joaquin was barely conscious when we returned, his haggard features twisting with terror as he saw me. But with gentle voice and gentler hand, I assured him I was myself again, begging forgiveness as I bandaged up his throat. The guilt was awful, his blood burning within me like no smoke nor drink I'd ever swallowed, those kicked-puppy eyes following me as I began filling his saddlebags.

"'What are you d-doing?' he whispered.

"'Packing your things. You're gone from here today.'

"'Bull*shit…'*

"'He speaks truth, Joaquin,' Aaron said. 'You can't stay here. Not anymore.'

"'He caught me by surprise, Capitaine. N-next time, I'll be ready.'

"'Next time, it might not be him, son.'

"That thought sobered Joaquin and me both. Aaron was just as hungry as I, remember. But still, the boy tried to rise, sagging against the cave wall.

"'I'll n-not abandon Dior.'

"'This isn't about Dior anymore,' I growled. 'You ride out with us now, you'll never live to save her. I've tried, boy. God help me, I've *tried* to keep this thing in me chained. But next time it breaks loose, I'll not be able to stop it. Someone will have to stop *me*.'

"I walked to Joaquin's side, squeezing his shoulder.

"'You've done enough, son. I vow by whatever God is listening, if nothing else, I'll save Dior from that bastard's clutches. I swear it.'

"He hung his head, lip trembling, and I turned back to his horse to spare him the shame of his tears. I couldn't blame him a drop, in truth. He'd come so far. Given all he had.

"'That's t-too much.'

"I turned at Joaquin's whisper, saw his eyes on the bags I was loading.

"'That's almost all the food w-we have,' he said. 'If you give that to m-me, you'll have nothing left to get you back.'

"I smiled weakly, dried blood cracking on my skin.

"'No happy ever afters, remember?'

"We wrapped the lad in furs, turned him east, and watched him trudge away on his horse. As he slipped from sight through the tumbling snows, the endless dark, he turned and raised his hand in farewell, Aaron and I answering with the same. I'd no real knowing if Joaquin would make it home. But he was dead if he stayed with us.

"As I watched the houndboy fade into the gloom, I felt my Astrid behind me. Real as my own breath and blood. My chest ached as she wrapped cold arms about my waist, pressed cold lips to the back of my neck. Long raven locks entwining me in shadow.

"*'Soon,'* she breathed.

"I nodded slow, looking to that softly burning horizon.

"'Soon.'"

II

CHARBOURG

“TWENTY-SIX YEARS. MORE than *twenty-six years* after the fall of daysdeath, we still wondered how. Some said a star had fallen across the sea, and the smoke from its fires blackened the sun. Some said there’d been another war in heaven, the earth broken and blasted skyward by the bodies of falling angels. Some said it was simply the will of a vengeful God.”

The Last Silversaint steepled his fingers at his chin.

“Like most things, the truth was somewhere between.

“The Testaments named Charbourg the city where the Redeemer died. Histories said the capital of Old Talhost was once the mightiest metropolis in the realm. But centuries had passed since then, and even left to the teeth of time, Charbourg would’ve been ruins by now. As it was, Father Time had enjoyed some help.

“As Aaron and I rode westward, the earth became more restless, that glow on the horizon only grew. And though we weren’t yet at the edge of spring, the snows had stopped falling completely. Ashes fell from the sky now, the ground beneath us turned to rock and soot, the stench of brimstone so thick in the air, every breath was a war. The peaks of the Zamesk loomed before us, and cresting their broken foothills, looking down on the valley that held the remains of that once-great city, finally, *finally* we understood.

“The earth around the Charbourg was … broken. Great fissures radiated outward from the city walls, like cracks in a punched looking glass. They reached down into the roots of the earth, and surely all the way to the abyss beyond. For *here* was the source of that baleful glow, radiating upward with the smoke and heat and stench of hell itself.

"'I drank Dior's blood in León.'

"My voice was graveled, tongue dry as dust as I spoke to Aaron beside me, both of us looking down on that shattered valley, that dead city beyond.

"'A few drops,' I told him. 'Nothing more. But afterward, I saw a waking dream, brother. The empire laid out beneath me. Wolves of Chastain south. Ravens of Voss east. And north, a great hand, rising above those peaks and tearing the sun from the sky.'

"I nodded to the cracks spreading outward from Charbourg's ruins. They were many, like tributaries of great rivers running through the earth. But the worst of them, the *deepest* of them, the burning rivers themselves numbered …

"'Five,' I murmured. 'Five fingers on a hand.'

"'Five bloodlines.'

"'Coincidence?'

"Aaron sighed. 'I don't care anymore, Gabriel. I just want my husband back.'

"I reached down to the arm wrapped about my waist, taking hold of her hand. My bride pressed closer behind me, breathing my name as the ashes fell all around us. And kissing Astrid's cold knuckles one by one, I nodded.

"'Then let's go get him.'

"Charbourg was a city long gutted, but even at this distance, its bones spoke of an ancient grandeur. Great walls crumbled at its edges, broken spires reached into blackened skies. The way forward grew treacherous; jagged cliffs dropping into smoking gulfs, tumbled hills and gaping fissures and shattered plains, and at long last, I was forced to bid adieu to my brave Argent. I kissed his brow and whispered thanks, leaving him with Eclipse and pushing on with Aaron on foot, our eyes narrowed against the ash and ember r—"

"Wait."

The silversaint raised one brow as Jean-François leaned forward.

"You're saying the horses … lived?"

Gabriel frowned. "Why does that surprise you?"

"Because every other stallion, mare, and gelding you've mentioned during this tale is *dead*. I was beginning to think it some morbid jest on your part. About the only occupation in Elidaen more dangerous than *Horse With a Name* is *Woman Who Slept With Gabriel d*—"

"Can I finish this fucking story or no?"

The vampire eased back into his chair, twirling his quill.

"S'il vous plaît."

The silversaint scowled another moment before continuing.

"So. Onward we walked. My veins were fire, my thirst raging, and reaching to my bandolier, I stuffed the last of my sanctus into my pipe, dragging red smoke into my lungs. We were close to those broken walls now, scrabbling over shattered ground, looking for signs of our enemy. We'd no clue how much ground Voss had gained on us, nor how long ago he'd arrived. For all we knew, the Forever King had already turned every mortal in his company, and we faced not a band of thrallswords, but hungry highblooded warriors.

"Baptiste among them.

"The earth trembled, I stumbled, and catching Aaron's arm to stop my fall, I lost my grip on my pipe. It slipped from my fingers, tumbling into a nearby fissure, disappearing down into the starving earth. But rather than lunge for it … I let it fall.

"Cold lips on the back of my neck.

"Cold fingers entwined in mine.

"Onward, we marched.

"It was at the city's edge we met them. Flitting through the smoke and shadows like thieves. A haggard lad in ash-streaked leathers broke from cover, running across the broken ground and back toward the walls. Thinking him a scout for Voss, we dashed after him, me on his tail and Aaron flanking left through the rubble.

"I'd a brace of wheellocks across my chest, but wanting no ruckus, I drew a dagger from my boot instead. The lad cried out as it struck him in the back, sending him sprawling into the ash and gravel. I was on him in a heartbeat, silversteel blade raised high as he rolled over, eyes wide, hand upraised to fend off the deathblow.

"'STOP!'

"The shout was furious, familiar, enough to halt my strike. Turning, I saw a bedraggled mademoiselle standing up from cover, glaring at me in fury.

"'Bloody well *stop* it!' she cried, stamping her foot. 'I've lost enough on this waltz through hell without you puncturing my last decent fuck pillow!'

"I blinked ashes from my eyes, scowling as I recognized her.

"'Ambassador Chastain.'"

"Oh, *Lord…"* Jean-François groaned. "I was wondering when she'd rear her head."

"I'd have been content never seeing her again," Gabriel replied. "But there she stood, in all her bedraggled glory. Her once-beautiful gown was torn and filthy, her once cream-pale skin now caked in ash. A few grubby thralls stood up from the rubble about her, hands to their weapons but no fight in their eyes. Her little rat-dog was cradled in her arm, barking as it saw Aaron rising from a broken spur of stone, Epitaph in hand.

"Nicolette blew a strand of ash-caked blond from her face and glowered at him.

"'Well?' she demanded. 'The looming is all very impressive, monsieur, but if you're planning on murdering us, bloody well get on with it. I've had it up to my *tits* with this rot.'

"Aaron raised a brow to me. The fallen thrall groaned as he pulled my dagger loose.

"'Oh, stop *whining,* Charl, and get up. You're embarrassing me.'

"I stepped on the fellow's chest to stop him rising, eyes on Nicolette.

"'The fuck are you doing out here?'

"'Is it not obvious?' she demanded. 'Getting as far from this desolate shit-pit as my far-less-fabulous-than-they-used-to-be boots can carry me.'

"'You traveled with Voss?' Aaron asked. 'How long ago did you arrive?'

"'What does it bloody matter?'

"'He has my friends and daughter,' I growled. 'It's a *matter* of life and death.'

"Nicolette looked at the greatsword in Aaron's hands, rolling her eyes.

"'We arrived three days back. Or nights, who can bloody tell anymore.'

"'Baptiste,' Aaron said. 'Dior. Do they live?'

"'Of *course* the girl lives,' she spat. 'You think Lord Voss would squander that whining little slip after the price he paid for her purchase?'

"'And Baptiste?'

"Nicolette shrugged. 'He was alive a few hours back. Now? Who knows…'

"Aaron gritted his teeth, looking toward the broken city. I drew my silversteel blade.

"'Start talking, mademoiselle. As if your forever depended on it.'

"Nicolette pursed her lips, shushed her growling hound. 'Three days, as I said. Lord Fabién set his thralls to it as soon as we arrived. Working among the ruins in the central district. They assembled not long ago, and we took our chance to disavail ourselves of the Forever King's hospitality. And before you ask, I know not what he's doing, and nor do I bloody care. I have heard enough of prophecy and destiny and *insanity* these last few months to last my eternity. I would be *gone* from this place, Chevalier, and if you've anything left of your wits, you'll be gone too.'

"'And why's that?'

"She looked at me like I was moonstruck.

"'He knows you're coming, you bloody fool. He *wants* you there. He wants *you*!'

"Nicolette pulled her dress into rough shape, smoothed back her wind-struck hair.

"'So. If you're set to feed us blades for breakfast, on with the bloody show. Otherwise I'd appreciate you tiptoeing right the jollying *fuck* out of my way.'

"She glanced again at the greatsword in Aaron's hand, dropping into a tiny curtsey.

"'S'il vous plaît.'

"'Gabriel…'

“I met Aaron’s desperate eyes. And easing my boot off the thrall’s chest, I nodded.

“‘Merci, mademoiselle. Go with God.’

“‘Oh, *fuck* him!’

“With no backward glance to the Chastain cadre, Aaron and I were off. Stealing through shattered walls, dashing among broken spires on that blasted city’s edge. Ashes were piled thick in the quaking streets, and even with paleblood eyes, the smoke and dark were damn near blinding. Shadows danced with the earth beneath us, figures flickering at the edges of our eyes, vanishing like ghosts. On we ran, stumbling, desperate, my thirst almost forgot beneath the cold fear in my belly. *Patience*. *Dior*. *Baptiste*. *Aaron*. The only people I had left in this world that mattered, all now poised on the edge of this blade. I knew not what we’d find in the dark ahead, save an ending.

“And toward it we ran.”

III

BROKEN STEEL

“*PRIESTS OF GODS false and covenants broken*.

“So the Testaments spoke of they who brought the Redeemer to this city a millennia ago and ended his mortal life upon the wheel. Back flayed to the bone. Crown of briars on his brow. Throat cut ear to ear. I knew now those ‘gods false’ were not many, but one, and Voss and his fellows had been that dark king’s servants all. Yet it was *here* at the sight of his murder that the Redeemer’s ancestors had raised their banner; the children of Esan fighting against the Augustin empire for a dominion they claimed was theirs by right.

“I tried to imagine this place as it had been before the Emperor’s armies and the Knights of the Blood destroyed it. But much as I tried, climbing over those broken stones and rent fissures, through the darkness hanging in those shattered streets, I could see only the ruin in folly’s wake. The cost of pride among mortal men and immortal monsters both. And squinting through the smoke and broken spires in that slain city’s heart, I finally saw where the traitorous half brother of God’s own son had been leading us all this time.

“The plains around the Charbourg were carved into five slices by those great fissures, like pieces of a dropped dinner plate. And it was *here* the first hints of those dreadful cracks began. The shape was enormous; a jagged and towering shadow, rising high above the ruins ahead. Shattered dome and blasted walls, splintered pillars rising like the ribs of some great slain beast, left to rot in endless darkness. Yet by its silhouette, I knew what this place must have been before the fall.

"'A cathedral,' Aaron whispered.

"Sulfur and smoke stained the air, the darkness about us only thickening. Yet as we ran on, I noted the stench of brimstone and ash cut through with a brighter perfume. It shivered me to my bones, familiar, terrifying, my throat tightening and pulse quickening at the knowledge of what it was. Who had spilled it.

"'What *is* that?' Aaron asked, nose to the wind.

"'Blood,' I replied. 'Dior's blood.'

"A mob of wretched waited ahead—despite the fumes and smoke wreathing us, we could yet smell the decay. And though we understood if we struck them, Voss would know it, we were so afeared for the ones we loved now, Aaron and I threw all caution aside. They stumbled from the rubble, empty eyes and rotten breath, without pattern or direction. And together, we cut them down into the ashes. For a moment I was reminded of years past and battles won; the pair of us fighting side by side, just like old times.

"But only for a moment.

"I drank among the corpses, barely holding on to the leash of that enemy within. It roared at me to remain, to glut myself on the Dead, to drink until I drowned. But clinging to my vow, desperate, I tore my mouth from the necks of those fallen wretches and ran on.

"The dark was so thick I could taste it, and echoing among those ruins, I swear I could hear the hymn of choirs long dead. The scent of Dior's blood was overpowering as we ran past shattered statues of weeping angels, up what was left of the great cathedral's stairs, and finally, through the gaping maw that had once been its dawndoors.

"A vast aisle of broken flagstones stretched before us.

"Row upon row of crumbling pillars, like broken fingers clawing upward from hell.

"And on a great dais in its heart, among the pieces of a splintered altar, just as it must have done on this ground a *thousand* years ago, stood a wheel."

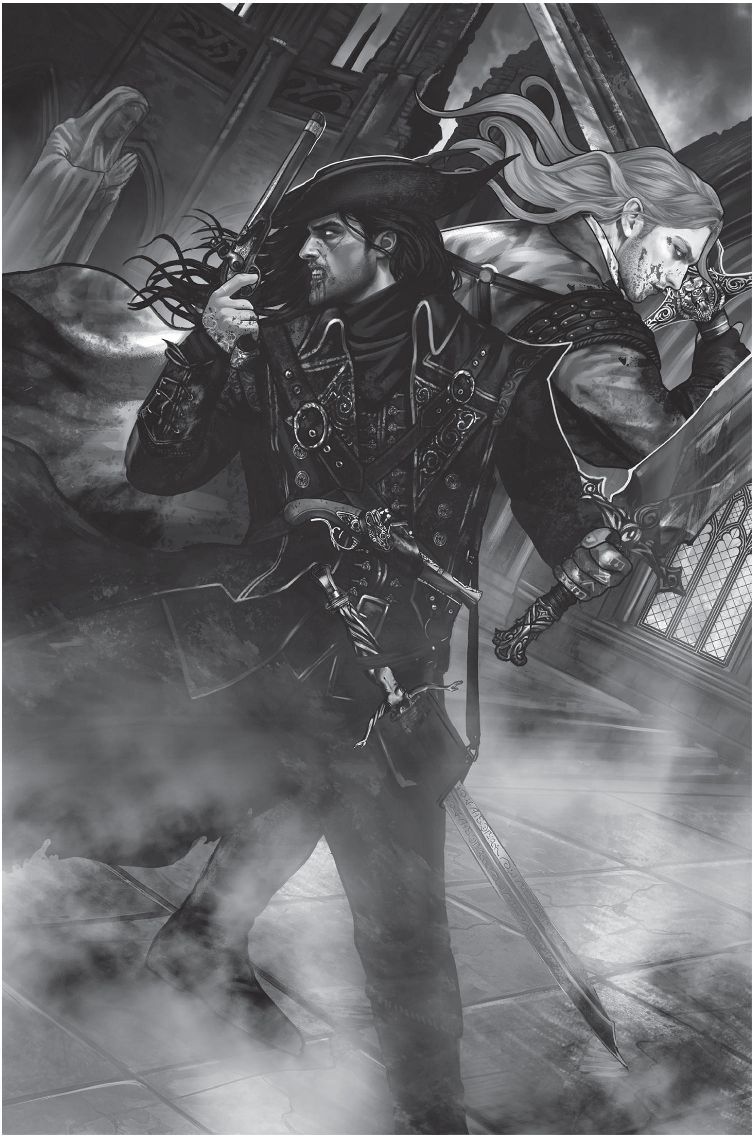
The Last Silversaint clenched his jaw, grey eye aflame.

"And Dior was *nailed* to it.

"The sight of her filled me with rage, the scent of her blood with awful hunger. Her head hung low, eyes closed, but I saw she yet breathed. Her coat had been torn away, tattered shirt clinging to sweat-slicked skin. Her body had been flayed by a ten-tail whip. Her skin scorched with fire. The wheel she was nailed to had been taken from one of Voss's wagons, held upright by wooden spars driven into the rock. It was tilted forward, Dior suspended over a great stone bowl on a marble plinth. A tangle of briar twigs was arrayed upon her brow, thorns digging into her skin—the black crown Kestrel and Danton had promised. And blinking the tears from my eyes, I knew what I was seeing.

“A re-creation.

“A portrait of the day the Redeemer first laid his curse upon the Five.



“A dark congregation sat among stone pews—highbloods of the Ironheart court and a cadre of hopeful thrallswords. But the latter were stirring now, rising to face Aaron and me stalking down the aisle. I saw Morgane, gown and skin and hair caked in ash, lurking in the shadows beside a blood-spattered thrall, a bloody whip tipped with silvered barbs in his fist. I saw my Patience, Morgane's hands planted upon her shoulders, holding tight. I felt Astrid at my side then, bristling at the sight of that monster with her hands on our baby.

"'Papa, you *came*!'

"But I was heedless in that moment, even to my own daughter's voice. All thought, all sense, all *hate* bent upon he who stood on that dais by Dior's side, clothed in robes of gold-trimmed white like some priest of old, a razored knife gleaming in his hand.

"'*How good of thee to join us,*' Fabién smiled. '*Old friend.*'

"I could feel Astrid behind me; a zephyr of mother's rage, cold hands wrapped about mine as I charged down the aisle toward the monster who'd taken my angels away. Thralls rose to meet us, terror in their eyes—the promise of life eternal so close, yet so far away. The silverbombs I threw illuminated the dark, wheellock shots echoing on the gables, dust drifting down from the broken dome. Bodies were blasted apart, burned blood spattering my face, the beast in me bellowing more, *MORE*. My eyes were fixed on Voss, Patience again crying my name, my brother running at my side.

"Four highblooded Ironhearts emerged from the smoke with blades drawn. Aaron stepped up to greet them, but I danced away, skirting past that flashing steel, those razored fangs, taking the steps up the dais four, five at a time.

"And blade raised high, I lunged for the Forever King.

"Voss didn't move, bemused as I swung my blade. I'd brought it with me all the way from Augustin, Historian. The last gift of a brother fallen.

"The greatsword of Lachlan á Craeg.

"If hate was the measure of a man's skill, Voss would have died then and there. But he was yet the father of all Ironhearts, and though forged in San Michon, Lachie's blade was only silversteel, and already broken on the skin of the Iron Maiden.

"The greatsword's remainder shattered on the Forever King's skin, like crockery dropped onto cold marble, splinters glittering in the dark. But in truth, I'd struck that blow only to distract. And as Voss slapped the broken sword away, staggered just a *touch* under the force of all that hatred, I wrapped my other hand about his throat.

"Patience cried out in fear as my fingers brushed Voss's skin. I saw that smile fading from ashen lips. And unleashing the power in my blood—the power of the line he'd almost destroyed—I felt my own lips curl as Voss's veins began to boil.

"Smoke rose from his flesh, black eyes bright with pain, close enough to see my face reflected in them as he buried his knife in my chest.

"The pain was shocking, his blade sunk spine-deep, steel scraping bone. I gasped as he *twisted* it, blood bubbling up my throat, spattering his face. And hard as marble, strong as steel, Voss lifted me off the stone.

"'*This be futility, Gabriel.*'

"With a shrug, he hurled me across the room, crashing against a broken pillar.

"'*No man of woman born can slay me.*'

"'Gabriel!' Aaron roared.

"My brother fought yet with the highbloods, spattered in blood and ash, Epitaph singing as it cleaved one courtier's head off her shoulders. But much as he wished it, Aaron couldn't yet reach me, his flesh split and bleeding, pressed on all sides by our foes.

"Voss loomed above me now, stooping to grab my throat. I seized his wrist, unleashing my bloodgift once more, but a punch fell like an anvil across my jaw. He hit me again, *again,* fireworks bursting behind my eyes. The beating he gave me was the worst I'd ever taken, but his expression was as serene as an old gentleman out for a late-night stroll.

"'Papa!' Patience struggled in Morgane's grip. 'Papa Fabién*, stop*!'

"'*Hush, my dove,*' Voss cooed. '*All shall be well.*'

"Aaron's blade felled the last of the courtiers, splitting the highblood clean in half. And with a roar, he dashed toward Voss. I was barely conscious now, the Forever King letting me slip his grip as he turned to face my brother's charge. Voss stepped aside the first blow, ducked another, Epitaph booming as it skimmed his chin.

"'*Recognize I, this blade,*' he smiled. '*Its former owner was a master with it.*'

"Aaron struck again, Voss moving like liquid away from the blow.

"'*I taught little Nikita everything he knew.*'

"Epitaph sang as it cut the air, Aaron snarling as Voss again stepped aside.

"'*Kneel. Roll over. Beg.*'

"Voss's smile turned sly as he slipped beneath another blow.

"'*Which was thy favorite, Aaron Dyvok?* '

"'MY NAME IS *DE COSTE*!'

"The blow was terrifying, shaking the walls as it came. Aaron's blade struck home, biting into Voss's neck. My hand had already burned him there, and I saw Fabién's eyes widen as the sound of cracking stone rang in that great cathedral. For one desperate, giddy moment, I allowed myself to believe.

"Then Epitaph shattered.

"Voss struck, serpent swift, almost tearing Aaron's jaw off with his claws. My brother was sent reeling backward, spraying blood and cursing as his boot snagged on the broken altar stones. His blade had been splintered like glass, perhaps only a foot remaining above the haft, but Epitaph was still in Aaron's grip as he hit the ground with a curse.

"He'd fallen near the dais's heart, gasping and torn. Dior was yet nailed to the wheel behind him, head hung low, stone spattered with her blood. Aaron staggered to his feet, looked to the girl, his voice a whisper.

"'Forgive me, child.'

"And eyes on Voss, he drew his broken blade along her skin.

"Dior moaned, yet still didn't open her eyes as Aaron sliced her thigh open. I knew the wound would heal, but I still flinched as Aaron cut her, deep enough to coat the edges of his blade in her holy blood.

"Morgane cried warning, and Patience screamed as Aaron advanced, the jagged remains of his sword dripping in his hands. The game had changed now, sure and true—one strike from that broken steel could set even Voss's flesh aflame. Fabién actually looked afeared as Aaron struck, *head, throat, belly,* the Forever King twisting aside the blows, slapping the last of them away. But with all the deadly skill he'd honed in his years in the monastery, the strength of the Untamed in his veins, Aaron's broken blade finally struck true, slicing through the palm of Voss's outstretched hand.

"Voss roared, flailing, left hand now ablaze. Holy fire roaring over his flesh, Fabién fell back to the ground, plunging his arm into the ancient sands across the cathedral floor. But raising his sword to finish the execution, Aaron faltered as a figure lunged from the shadows, barring his way to the fallen Forever King.

"'Baptiste…'

"The blackthumb now stood between husband and prey. One hand was raised in supplication, the other holding a sword, eyes full of desperate, hopeless love.

"'Please, don't,' he whispered.

"'Get out of the way, love,' Aaron growled.

"'No.'

"'Baptiste, I swear *God*—'

"'All our lives, they tried to keep us apart!' Baptiste cried. 'The mob! The Church! The fucking Brotherhood! But we defied them all, Aaron! Because we loved each other! And now, after spurning the will of *God* himself, you tell me we're still to be parted?'

"Baptiste shook his head, tears spilling down his cheeks.

"'I wanted to grow *old* with you! But if I must live in darkness to stay at your side, then I do it gladly!' Baptiste clenched his jaw, standing tall. 'I *want* this, Aaron!'

"'Then kill me.'

"Baptiste blinked, bewildered.

"'*… What?* '

"'Kill me!' Aaron roared. 'Lift your sword, husband mine, and deliver me below!'

"Aaron stalked forward, Baptiste fell back, eyes wide as Aaron bellowed.

"'*Do* it! I'd prefer flame eternal than to see you join me in living hell!'

"Baptiste raised his blade, tears in his eyes. But Aaron smashed it aside.

"'That won't be enough, love! It'll take the blood of the Redeemer to end me!'

"Fire blazed in Aaron's gaze as he grabbed his husband's hand. And wrapping it around Epitaph's haft, he turned the broken blade toward himself, poised above his heart.

"'*There* it is.'

"They hung frozen in that shattered cathedral, staring into each other's eyes. Bloody tears spilled down Aaron's cheeks, his husband weeping with him. So much love. So much pain. And Baptiste whispered then, breaking whatever was left of my wretched heart.

"'It's not *fair*.'

"'I know.'

"'I love you so m-much.'

"'I know.'

"Baptiste hung his head.

"His hand fell from Epitaph's haft.

"And the Forever King pushed."

The Last Silversaint fell still. Silence rang in the cell of Sul Adair, Jean-François watching as Gabriel lifted the bottle to his lips and drank. He swallowed once, twice, a ribbon of wondrous red spilling down his stubbled chin. And as he lowered the bottle, tears fell from his eye.

"I t-tried to cry warning," he whispered. "But Voss had beaten me so badly, I could barely draw breath. I watched him rise up behind Baptiste, the flesh of his arm burned back to bone. And hatred in his eyes, he took hold of my brother's shoulders and *shoved*. A thousand years his tally on this cruel earth—no Dyvok to be sure, but Fabién's strength was titanic. Enough to drive Baptiste's chest onto Epitaph's haft, the pommel bursting out through his back in a spray of red as the broken blade plunged through Aaron's heart.

"And where the Redeemer's blood touched…"

Gabriel hung his head, tears pattering on the stone beneath him.

"I screamed as they burned. Entwined on that broken steel. Embracing in those hungry flames. I'd known them both since we were boys. Back when we believed we'd make a difference. That we'd somehow save this world. You never know friendship as fierce as the ones you find when you're a child, vampire. Aaron and Baptiste had been part of the fire that forged me into the man I'd become.

"But whatever was left of him died as his friends did.

"I tried to rise as Voss stalked toward me, seizing me in one blackened claw and dragging me off the stone. But I was yet too broken to fight. He gazed into my eyes, and upon his, I saw myself reflected; alone, bleeding, utterly at his mercy.

"*'So it ends. And so it begins.'*"

IV

THE DREAM BE DEAD

“HE HURLED ME to the floor so hard the flagstones split.

“As Voss stalked slow toward me, I pawed the gore from my eyes, searching for some last desperate gambit. Some impossible way out. I lay sprawled before that great stone bowl, Dior suspended on the wheel above it. Her lashes were yet fluttering upon her cheeks, but though I whispered her name, pleading, she barely stirred.

“The great cathedral was a ruin as I said, circular like the Redeemer’s wheel. Its diameter was so vast that its edges were lost in darkness, but around the circumference, by the faint light spilling through long-broken windows, I saw the remains of five stone bowls. They were fashioned like the one I lay before now, equally spaced, broken into pieces. I saw it was from *these* bowls that those dreadful rends in the earth began. Cleaving the flagstones and walls apart, widening and deepening as they stretched outward through the city, splitting the plains beyond and unleashing those fumes into the sky.

“*This* was daysdeath. It had begun *here,* on this very ground.

“‘How?’

“I breathed the word, looking up at Voss through bloodshot eyes. He loomed above me now, bloodied knife in hand, smiling with awful fondness.

“‘How d-did you do it?’

“*‘I would tell thee why? That ye may* undo *it?* ’

“‘Y-you owe me, bastard.’

"He laughed then, fangs gleaming.

"*'All I owe thee shall be repaid tenfold. Ye understand not the* gift *thou art about to receive, my dear Gabriel. Every child I hath sired up to this moment hath been born of chance. A victim, that I might otherwise have scorned to endure eternity with. Thou shalt be the first Prince of Forever* chosen *by my will. My first begotten son.'*

"'Papa?'

"Voss looked to my daughter, still in Morgane's clutches, red tears in her eyes.

"*'Patience, my love, my dove, my angel dear. Soon thou shalt have thy papa forever.'*

"I tried to rise, he grabbed the back of my neck, smashed me face-first into the stone. Black stars burst in my eyes, my brow split to the bone as Patience cried out in fear. I was barely aware as Voss stalked away like a wolf aprowl, slinking around and behind Dior. The flogging she'd received had been with a flail of silver, and child of the Moonsthrone though she was, her body couldn't heal those awful wounds. She was groaning softly, rising toward consciousness but not yet arrived. But her eyes finally fluttered open as Voss seized hold of her hair, pulling back her head.

"Her eyes met mine then, blurred and blinking, awful hope shining in that pale blue.

"'P-Papa…'

"And without a word, Voss sliced her throat.

"I *roared,* trying desperately to rise, but with the speed of a stolen millennium, he was on me, planting his boot between my shoulderblades, pushing me down to the broken stone. I was forced to watch as Dior gasped, coughing red, filled with the same helplessness as the night he'd knocked on our door. I bellowed her name as she struggled, bubbling, choking, that holy blood spilling down her chin and spattering into the bowl before me.

"Fabién watched, a triumphant smile upon his lips. And there he stood with me beneath his boot, statue still, watching Dior bleed. The knife he'd used was simple steel, and though the pain and fear must have been awful, Dior's suffering was mercifully brief, the wound slowly stitching closed by the power of the Moonsthrone inside her.

"But by then, that bowl was *brimming* with her blood.

"Its perfume was terrible bliss—the beast in me roaring at the want of it. And as if in answer, Voss pinned my wrists at the small of my back, and lifting me like I was made of feathers, pushed my face into that flood of red.

"*'Drink. As we did.'*

"I roared, trying to breathe, to lift my head. But despite the danger it posed him, Voss held me down in that bowl of beautiful, awful crimson. The thirst in me was a living thing, stronger than it had *ever* been, smashing itself against the bars in my mind. Voss pressed down upon me, all his power, *all* his will, battering my defenses from without just as that monster crashed upon them from within.

"'Drink,' they demanded.

"*'DRINK.'*

"I fought as best I was able. I fought with all I had. But like I've told you, coldblood, in the end, the only weapon in the war against yourself is *yourself*. And like the blade of starsteel yet hanging at my side, I'd been broken in two. So, much as it shames me now, I did as they commanded.

"I drank.

"Voss smiled in triumph when I was done, letting me slither to the stone. The power of the Redeemer's blood gripped me, washing over me and *smashing* through me; not simply the hint I'd tasted from that mouthful in León, but a hurricane, a tempest, filling me to bursting. My spine arched, mouth open in a silent scream, muscles stretched to breaking.

"*'Those priests of gods false and covenants broken, numbering all the fingers on hell's burning hand did stand in bleak amazement.'*

"Voss's voice rang in that broken church, inside my broken mind, the walls of me collapsing, the whole of me unraveling. Thunder crashed in hidden skies above, stones trembling, dust falling, Patience screaming my name.

"*'And the Redeemer raised his eyes to his Almighty Father's throne, and his heart did stain the bones of the earth, and with voice akin to thunder, he cried.'*

"Every nerve on fire. Every drop of me aflame. I heard myself screaming, *screaming* as it filled me, the light of life, the fire of the heavenly forge, the essence of eternity itself. I felt the breath of God on the back of my neck. I felt the call of forever in my soul.

"*'BY THIS BLOOD SHALL HE HAVE LIFE ETERNAL!'*

"Silence fell.

"An emptiness one thousand years wide.

"I opened bloodshot eyes, looking to the King above me. He gazed down upon me like father to newborn, his smile full of bleak pride and terrible love.

"*'My son.'*

"I drew one shaking breath.

"Looking upon he who'd be my maker.

"And I started laughing.

"Voss stared down at me, smile fading, a small frown marring his marble brow. And beaten and broken though I was, I rolled onto my side and continued to guffaw. All he'd given, all he'd sacrificed, all he'd lost to bring us here …

"*'No,'* he whispered.

"I was still breathing. Still *living*. My heart yet beating, my blood yet rushing hand in hand with hers, out, *out* through my burning veins. Voss looked to the brimming bowl, to Dior upon the wheel, his face twisting in absolute rage.

“‘*No*. NO!’

“Reaching up, he rent his collar, tearing that robe of white and gold at the throat. And though Forever’s King had once seemed a thing made of cold stone, a fury like thunder and flame was come upon him now. He whirled about, eyes searching the shadows, bellowing again in shapeless fury. And hurling that bloody knife across the shattered dais, arms spread wide, he screamed at the broken ground beneath him.

“‘*Thou hast* promised*! Thou didst* PROMISE *me!* ’

“He stamped his foot like a thwarted child, cracking the stone beneath him.

“‘*All thou hast asked, I hath given! All thou hast whispered, hath I obeyed! Faithful and true hath I served thee, a* thousand *years and more! But by thy hand WAS I DOOMED TO FOREVER!* AND I SHALL NOT SPEND IT ALONE!’

“Fabién’s roar echoed on those broken gables, those shattered walls. But as the echo faded, I heard more chuckling, venomous and soft.

“Turning, Voss looked upon his daughter.

“‘*Morgane?* ’ he breathed. ‘*Ye dare?* ’

“That daughter of forever stood in shadow, my own daughter yet pinned in her claws. But as Morgane looked upon her king, just as I’d seen the night we spoke in San Maximille, in her eyes I saw the hatred of poison centuries.

“‘*See ye not? The prize thy service hath purchased? He hath* deceived *thee, Father.*’

“‘*No! I hath served him well and true! He* promised *me the gift! He* swore *it me!* ’

“Morgane blinked, bewildered.

“‘*He be the prince of lies. Why conjure thee, he should gift thee truth?* ’

“Voss took one step forward, glowering.

“‘*Ye know* nothing *of what ye speak, daughter mine.*’

“But Morgane shook her head.

“‘*I know ceaseless hath been thy labors to please thy emperor fallen. I know thou hast served him truer than any who hath e’er bent the knee. For look now upon this world he doth so despise, Father.*’ Morgane gestured at the wasteland about us, a single bloody tear spilling down her cheek. ‘*All light perished. All love lost. The Almighty’s greatest creation be* ruined *by thy hand. The dream be dead. What need further, hath thy dark lord of thee?* ’

“Morgane released her grip on Patience, stepping toward Fabién.

“‘*Why would I not laugh, Father? When by the hand of hell’s bleak prince is Forever’s King a* jester *made?* ’

“Voss drew back his hand.

“Morgane touched my mind.

“And punching clean through her chest, Fabién ripped out his daughter’s heart.

“Morgane had no time to scream, no time left at all; her body torn apart by the cold hands of time. Patience screamed instead, brittle and shrill, her terror echoing on the broken walls as Morgane’s body simply blew apart. The thunder of her death rang on the walls, a blast of ash and char blackening Voss’s robes and skin. And in the aftermath, a beautiful velvet gown and stole of fox fur drifted to the cold stone at Voss’s feet—all that remained of the Fifth Prince of Forever.

“But through the dust of Morgane’s ruin, a shadow fell then, like a spear hurled from heaven’s hand. A flash of crimson, a whistling blur, a blade of blood brought down so swift upon Fabién’s throat the ruptured marble of his skin cracked even further.

“Snarling, he was flung backward, boots skidding upon broken stone.

“Reaching up to his neck, he blinked at the single drop of red on his fingertips.

“Celene rose up from her crouch, leveling her bloody blade at his head.

“‘Judgment Comes.’”

V

NO MAN OF WOMAN BORN

JEAN-FRANÇOIS ARCHED ONE eyebrow, looking to the vampire across the water.

“You couldn’t have just done that to begin with?”

Celene tilted her head.

“How? We had only just reached the Charbourg.”

“How convenient, Mlle Castia,” the historian said. “A more critical reader might say *melodramatic*. To have arrived not soon enough to stop your brother being beaten and tortured, nor his friends tragically murdered, but yet in time to learn the truth of Voss’s stratagem and save the day? Hurrah *and* huzzah.”

The siblings glanced at each other across the water, Gabriel’s pulse quickening.

The historian yet glowered at the Liathe.

“Could it be, mademoiselle, that you secretly *wanted* to learn if Voss’s ritual would work? Could it be you *wanted* to see your dear brother cursed likesame as you?”

The Last Silversaint looked to the historian and scoffed softly.

“Maybe my wisdom hasn’t been totally w—”

“Oh, *fuck* off, Gabriel.”

“You demanded the story, and this is it.” Celene lifted her chin, glowering. “The Iron Maiden abides in the halls above, at your Empress’s own invitation. If you do not believe me, have her descend to ravage my mind with her bloodgifts and testify that I speak truth. I could not help that I was late for the finale, Marquis. The trek across Talhost left us starving, and I had to feast among the dead in Gabriel's wake if I *hoped* to stand against the Forever King. As it was, we were still famished as we entered that cathedral. But I'd no choice now but to fight at my cursed brother's side."

She glowered at her sibling, black eyes brimming.

"One last dance for old times' sake."

"I watched her falling through the dark," Gabriel said. "Striking the Forever King's throat, her bloodblade splitting into pieces. I heard that marble *crack* over the hiss of Voss's curse, the hymn of my own thundering pulse. My thirst was unleashed now, the monster had its head, but Dior's holy blood had mended any trace of the beating Voss had given me. And every vein singing, every drop of me awash in holy flame, I rose back to my feet.

"Patience cried out, voice bright with fear as I marched toward Voss. I could see the terror in my angel's eyes, my heart sinking as I realized she was afraid.

"Not for me. But for *him*.

"'Papa Fabién!'

"'Patience, stay back!' I roared.

"'Stop, you'll *hurt* him!'

"'Do as you're *told,* jeune fille!'

"My daughter shrank back into the shadows, afeared for the sire who'd loved her these last few years, but heedful of the father who'd raised her from a cub. I looked to Dior as I closed on Fabién, still nailed upon that hateful fucking wheel. Her eyes were open now, heavy-lidded, but she'd lost *so* much blood. Looking about, I spied a lone figure hiding behind a broken pillar, yet afeared to leave his master—the cowardly bastard who'd opened Dior's back up with that cursed silver whip.

"I ran him down as he tried to flee, snapping his neck with my bare hands. And snatching up that silver ten-tail, still wet with Dior's blood, I turned toward the fray."

"Voss and I were brawling," Celene said. "Across the shattered stone. And though I could feel faintly the hand of my old master guiding mine, I soon realized how much peril I was in. The Forever King moved like quicksilver, liquid in his grace and power. And more, though I tried my best to keep him out, my mind was his to plunder. He could see my blows before they fell. Sneer at my feints before I threw them. Against a foe who can read your thoughts, there can be no victory. At least, not if you stand alone.

"As children we'd first learned this song. Doing battle together around my papa's forge. Most children learning to fight will fray against each other, Historian, but my brother and I *never* did. Instead, we'd stand back-to-back, fighting invisible legions of imaginary foes.

“*Ever outnumbered. Never outmatched.*”

The Last Silversaint sighed.

“*Always Lions*.”

“But though not outnumbered,” Celene continued, “we *were* outmatched here. And even with the bloody whip he’d brought to bear, Gabriel was little help. The flail was too unwieldy, his reach too short, and though he came close once or twice to striking true, he was soon hurled backward, torn from crotch to neck by Voss’s claws.

“Gabriel cried out as he fell, intestines bulging through the rents in his skin. The Forever King turned back to me, shivering as he licked my brother’s blood from his fingers.

“‘Long *shall I savor thy sibling’s end, sanguimancer. But thee, I shall bury swift.’*

“He advanced, talons dripping red.

“*‘On this very ground I slew the founder of thy cursed cult. How think ye some misbegotten whelp shall stand ’gainst he who laid waste the first Faithless* and *her dream? ’*

“His claws punctured my chest.

“His fingers closed about my dead heart.

“*‘Gift fond curses to my master in hell.’*

“And over Voss’s shoulder, I saw my brother rise.”

“My guts were ripped wide,” Gabriel said. “But holding them in with one hand, I’d staggered back to my feet. I’d lost that cursed flail in my fall, no weapon left save one. I was terrified as I drew her from my scabbard—the friend who’d walked with me through blood and fire. Ashdrinker had broken on Voss’s skin when she was hale and whole, and she was neither now. Her song was brittle, shattered silver; that same tune she’d repeated since my sister broke her, ringing in the hallways of my mind.

“*Live esh’nadai dov nem da.*

“*Four tablespoons of b-b-butter.*

“*Me they I? We us who?*

“Dior’s head hung low, eyes closed once more. The awful slice at her throat had closed now, but she’d been bled near blue, the bowl before her filled with the best of her.

“And into it, I plunged my broken blade.

“Live esh’nadai.

“Four tablespoons.

“Me they I?

“I flew at Voss’s back, but through Celene’s eyes, he saw me coming. Without so much as a glance, he stepped aside, and I almost felled my sister with the blow. But he’d been forced to loose his grip at least, Celene’s traitorous heart still in her chest. Voss snaked backward, eyes on my broken blade, dripping with Dior’s blood.

“*‘Papa! ’*

“‘Stay back, Patience!’

“‘Please don’t hurt him!’

“‘STAY *BACK*!’

“*‘Fool,’* Voss sneered. ‘*No man of woman born may slay me.*’

“I spat on the ground, advancing on the monster who’d destroyed my world.

“‘I am Gabriel de León,’ I told him. ‘Savior of Nordlund. Sword of the Realm. Liberator of Triúrbaile and Redeemer of Tuuve.’

“I felt my bride slip her arms about my waist then, smooth and cool.

“‘I am the last son of Lorson. A husband widowed. A father grieved. I am all you have made me and more, Fabién. But I am surely no man.’

“I raised my broken blade, tears burning my eyes.

“‘I am a *lion*.’

“Celene slipped through the dark, bloody blade dripping in her hand as she stole around his flank. Our eyes met, she nodded once, my veins burning bright.

“And together, we charged.

“Fabién Voss was a creature who’d lived a thousand years. For someone who’d been everywhere, done *every*thing, to feel some new sensation was his deepest desire. And I could see he’d finally got his wish. For though his grace was peerless, strength monstrous, ambition boundless, in the depths of those black eyes of his, I could see fear now.

“*True* fear.

“He tore us both to shreds in his terror. None so afraid of dying as those who live forever. And his dread of hell awaiting was such that even fighting side by side, my sister and I might not have been enough. I couldn’t land my strikes. Guts clutched in one hand, boots filling up with blood. But focused as he was on the pair of us, Voss lost sense of his surrounds. And beside we three and my poor Patience, stood in the wings and *begging* us to stop hurting each other, there was one last player on that red stage.”

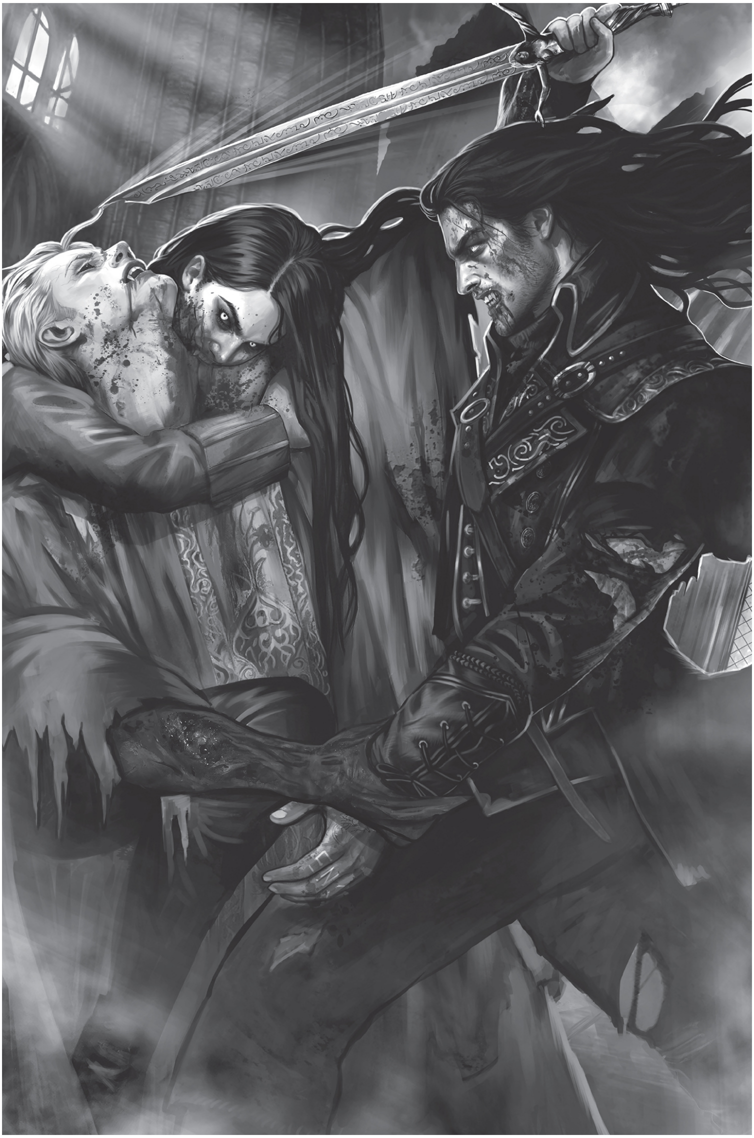
“Lachance,” Jean-François murmured.

“Whipped skinless,” Gabriel declared. “Sliced bloodless. Still, that daughter of the Moonsthrone and Redeemer both opened her eyes. She’d barely anything left inside her, but ever and always, she *fought*. And dragging up one last drop of strength from her dauntless heart, she lifted her head, and curled the fingers of her wounded hands.”

“Her blood trembled,” Celene said. “Congealed about those nails driven through her palms. Long months had we spent training in *Dawnseeker*’s hold. And though she never truly mastered the bloodblade, there was one arte my friend *had* made her own.

“Her fingers flashed open, crimson droplets spraying through the air. And as they flew, she narrowed tear-stung eyes, breath hissing through her teeth.

"'For tomorrow.'



"They formed into needles as they cut the air, gleaming red, razor sharp. Voss felt them coming, *saw* them in my mind, twisting aside at the last breath. But in the brief moment he watched those blades of blood sail harmlessly by, my brother struck."

"Ashdrinker felt a *feather* in my hands," Gabriel breathed. "Singing silver as she sped toward his heart. Voss caught my wrist, lips twisted in a hateful, triumphant snarl.

"Celene rose up behind him.

"His flesh was weakened—my blackened handprint, the crack from Aaron's blow, widened further by my sister's. And into it now, her teeth sank. Voss gasped, head thrown back, midnight eyes gone wide. Ashdrinker was poised above his heart, his hand still locked about my wrist. But against the bliss of the Kiss, even Forever's King had no defense.

"As Celene began drinking, I heard Fabién sigh. And though he yet fought against me with all he had, what he *had* was diminishing by the mouthful. Celene swallowed, greedy, groaning, claws sinking into the stone of that immortal flesh. Voss staggered, pressed between us now, black eyes blinking at the sky. I wondered if he'd ever felt this in all his years. I wondered if the bastard was bored now. He began trembling, me pressing down on Ash's hilt, her tip now sunk through his robe and brushing against his crumbling skin. But as his knees buckled, I heard a fearful cry.

"'Don't hurt him!'

"My sweet baby Patience. Ever she'd been the softest touch. I swear God, she used to cry if she stepped on a beetle. And unable to stand by as someone she cared for suffered, she'd thrown herself upon Celene's shoulders, beating away with little fists. My sister snarled then, the monster in her surfacing, eyes gone wide and black.

"'Patience, get *back*!'

"'Papa, no!'

"Ashdrinker met Voss's flesh, marble parting like water.

"The Forever King looked to the sky as she sank into his heart.

"*'Forgive me, brother…'*

"And then he was blasted apart.

"His end was thunderous, its heat blistering, a *thousand* stolen years come to claim their due. I was flung backward like a bag of rags and chaff, crashing into one of those towering pillars and feeling my bones shatter. The pillar wobbled, crumbling, tons of stone crashing down upon me and grinding my twice-broken bones into dust. But it was nothing. *Nothing* compared to what happened to her."

The Last Silversaint was staring at his sister now, bloody murder in his eye. The Last Liathe stared back, defiant, chin raised high.

"It was an accident, Gabriel."

"*Fuck* you."

"I did not mean—"

"FUCK *YOU*!"

The silversaint was on his feet now, roar echoing on the walls, set to fling himself across that gulf once more. But ready for the outburst, Jean-François nodded to the thrall capitaine, and raising his truncheon, the thug cracked it across the back of the silversaint's knees. Dario took three fearful steps back as Gabriel crumbled, still spitting hatred at Celene as the other thralls again set to, thrashing the fallen man with their clubs.

The sound of cracking bone rang in the cell, Jean-François's teeth clenched. He refused to watch as the silversaint was beaten bloody once more, eyes instead upon the monstress across the river. Celene Castia stood tall, her face a mask. But the Marquis saw that black gaze soften along with his own heart as he realized Gabriel was no longer cursing.

He was *weeping*.

Curled into a ball. Bloody hands over his face. This giant of a man. This legend living. Crying like a motherless babe. The sobs shook his body, soul-deep and shuddering.

The hymn of a broken soul.

"What happened, Mlle Castia?"

The Last Liathe looked up from her brother, meeting the historian's gaze. He understood at last now—how those awful wounds from her Becoming had been finally healed. Why her eyes were the pure black of an ancien's, rather than the fledgling she was. He understood now, the sense of menace he'd always felt in her presence. Who it was staring back at him among that legion behind her gaze.

But he could see nothing of Forever's King now.

Only the girl Celene Castia had once been.

"I thought only to get her off me," she whispered. "I did not push her hard. I was lost in him by then, you see. All that power. All those years. Flooding into me. Over me. Through me. The hurts in my flesh finally unwound, just like Aleks had promised in San Yves all those years before. But as I shoved my niece away, that last mouthful of him rushing down into my throat as Gabriel's blade sank into his heart, Voss exploded.

"We were flung like feathers. Patience and me. And though I was hurled back across the dais and into Dior, shattering that dreadful wheel she was nailed to, my poor niece…"

Celene hung her head, crying now, just like her brother.

"The bowl. The b-bowl o-of…"

Jean-François looked to the weeping silversaint, utterly horrified.

"The Redeemer's blood."

"I tried to p-put her out." The Liathe shook her head, bloody tears spilling down her cheeks. "God help m-me, I *tried*. She was screaming, just *screaming* as that fire rushed over her little body. I t-tore off my coat, tried to smother the flames b-beneath it, but they only spread from her flesh to mine. I *tried* to hold on, begging God and Mothermaid for mercy. But f-fear took me then. The agony of that awful holy fire.

"I threw myself to the ground, rolling about in the dust like some animal as the flames chewed my bones. I managed only at the last to douse them. I was burned, Marquis. Horribly, *terribly* burned. Nothing left of my arms but charcoal and twigs. Scorched almost blind. But … p-poor Patience…"

Celene looked to the floor and fell mute.

"I *hate* you."

The Liathe looked up then, into her brother's face. He lay yet on the river's bank, bloodied and broken. Yet he still had strength in him to spit.

"God, I *fucking* hate you."

"… I know, brother."

She lifted her chin then, jaw clenched.

"But the *world* will soon hate you."

The Liathe looked from her brother to the historian and back again.

"Tell him the last of it," she spat. "The final chapter of the *great* Gabriel de León."

The silversaint remained silent, gaze falling to the stone.

"What does she mean, Gabriel?" Jean-François asked.

"Dior," Celene hissed.

"What about her?"

Celene shook her head, teeth clenched so tight Jean-François heard them creak. The glower she aimed at her brother might have boiled the river between them, but still he stayed silent, avoiding her eyes. And finally the Liathe answered.

"After all that poor girl had been through. All she'd *given*. The moment my friend opened her eyes in the aftermath, her first care was not for herself, but *him*. Crawling over rubble. Through the ashes and blood to that shattered pillar he lay crushed beneath. She had barely a *drop* left inside her. And still, as she reached my brother's side, Dior took up a shard of stone in one trembling hand and sliced her wrist. *Begging* him to drink."

"I didn't want it."

Gabriel's voice was flat, grey eye haunted. His tears were spent now, insides hollowed out, this last lungful of bitter smoke all that remained.

"I didn't want it," he repeated.

"Yet you *took* it," Celene hissed.

The silversaint hung his head.

"I'd nothing left," he whispered. "My bride gone. My baby taken from me *again*. My body just as broken as my blade.

"*This is a good death,* I told myself. *A good end for a hero.*

"Ashdrinker was in the rubble with me, my hand drifting over the cool metal of her skin. She was shattered completely now, split all the way to her hilt and broken off inside the Forever King's heart. I knew she was dying, just as I was. But as my blood soaked the sands beneath us, with fading voice, still my old friend sang.

"*Live esh …*

"*Four sp-spoons …*

"*Me they …*

"I saw her above me now. Untouched by the hands of fate or the teeth of time. My Astrid reached out for me, across the wall of death.

"'*It's time, love.*'

"But then…"

Gabriel hung his head.

"Dior. Pressing that bloody wrist against my mouth. Tears falling on my skin like rain. I could see the hurt in her eyes, the fear, the pain, all a reflection of my own.

"'Please don't leave me,' she begged.

"She placed her wounded hand over mine, still on Ashdrinker's haft, the blade's voice naught but a whisper now. Perhaps it was Dior's bloody touch on her hilt. Maybe it was the last moment of clarity as the end claimed her. But as my friend's silvered voice drifted into silence, her final words rang in the halls of my mind. Not the whole nonsense song. Just the first fragments of it. The message she'd been trying to give me all this time.

"Live.

"For.

"Me.

"'Please, Papa,' Dior breathed.

"Live.

"For.

"Me.

"'Don't leave.'

"So I took hold of her hand. And I started to d-drink."

Silence rang in the cell beneath Sul Adair, thick enough to slice with a knife. And as it stretched on, taut as two bowstrings, the Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain lifted his head. Realization was sinking in, eyes falling on the man sat at the water's edge, arms wrapped around his belly, tears on his bloody cheeks.

"Oh my God," Jean-François whispered.

He looked across the river, chocolat eyes meeting midnight black. The Last Liathe stood tall beneath his stare, fingers and lips curled.

"And you name *me* monster."

Jean-François stood, aghast at the wretch before him. The silversaint wouldn't meet his gaze, hair tumbled about his ruined face as he rocked back and forth, moaning soft.

"*The cup is broken,* you told me. *The Grail is gone*."

"Witness now," Celene hissed, "the wretch who *broke* it."

The Last Silversaint hung his head.

His voice not even a whisper.

"I t-tried to stop."

He drew one shuddering breath, exhaled as a broken sob.

"B-but I *couldn't…"*

He doubled over then, brow pressed to bloody stone. His sobs were silent, his shame complete, guts spilled over the floor for the Marquis to finally wallow in. But looking down upon this wretched, broken ruin of a man, Jean-François knew not what to feel.

God help him, he knew *nothing* anymore.

Nothing, save perhaps that in all his nights, *all* his years, Jean-François had never met a man who'd suffered quite so much as this one.

"My *God,* Gabriel…"

"That was when she found us."

The historian looked to the thing across the river, watching with a dead king's eyes.

"Nicolette," he realized.

"She circled back after Gabriel and Aaron met her on the outskirts. Curiosity kills cats, but not wolves apparently. And stealing into that ruined church with her handful of thralls, your blood-niece came across our aftermath. Dior's body, cold and bloody and lifeless upon the stone. Gabriel was yet trapped in that rubble. Comatose. Healed without, but broken utterly inside. I was still too burned to fight, too numb to resist, barely aware of what was happening as they locked me down. But the box they threw me in was bound with silver, and after that…"

The Liathe shrugged, gesturing to the walls around her.

"So. The end at last. Was it everything you hoped for, seigneur?"

Jean-François was still standing, his history clutched in his hands. The full weight of the tale was yet settling on his bones, and still, he'd no idea how he should feel at all this. The wolf fretted not for the ills of the worm. But despite it all, strange as it might have seemed, he still felt a kinship with this pair. Theirs was a tragedy for the ages. And to have learned fully of the triumph and horror and all between that had led them to this …

"What did she say to you, Gabriel?"

The broken 'saint lifted his head, bewildered.

"… What?"

"You said Prince Morgane touched your mind before she died. What did she say?"

The ghost that had been Gabriel de León only shook his head.

"Nothing that m-matters anymore."

Jean-François pursed his lips. And sighing, he looked finally to Dario.

"Fetch the fetters, love."

The thrall nodded, walking to the ironbound chest that had once held the bottles of lamp oil. Fishing about inside, Dario drew out a pair of heavy leg irons. The *irons* were in fact solid silver, the thrall wincing as the metal scalded his bare hands. But after a nod from Jean-François, he tossed them swift across the river. They landed with a *clunk* at the Liathe's feet, gleaming in the chymical light.

"See the Last Silversaint to his cell, Dario."

"Your will be done, Master."

Dario nodded briskly to a quartet of ’swords, who stooped and dragged Gabriel to his feet. With a bow to Jean-François, the lad headed toward the great stone doors. As de León was half hauled and half carried from the cell, the historian carefully cleaned his quill, slowly packed away his ink, eyes on the monstress across the river.

“What am I supposed to do with those?” she asked, eyeing the manacles.

“Ankles. Once they’re secured, the good capitaine will be over to check.”

“Don’t want me running away from my execution?”

“Flying is more our concern. My mother has gone to a great deal of trouble to kill you, Mlle Castia. It would hardly do to have you flutter away before you take the stage.”

“Heaven forbid. But pray, how will I get there?”

Celene gestured to the black river between them. Jean-François smiled in reply.

“The same way you arrived, mademoiselle.” He nodded to an ironbound chest, still resting on the broken shoreline. “In a coffin.”

Celene clenched her jaw.

“Ankles,” he repeated.

Resigned now, the Last Liathe stooped to the oily stone. Rather than burn her hands, she shrugged off her coat, cinched the silver bonds around her boots. When she was done, the capitaine shot a warning glance to his remaining men, still stood on the shoreline with torches in hand. Wading across the river, bristling with threat, the capitaine stooped to inspect the Liathe’s handiwork. Satisfied, he nodded to the Marquis.

Jean-François tucked his history beneath his arm.

“Merci, Mlle Castia. It was truly a tale for the ages. And though I suspect it will not mean much, I am glad to have shared it, and am grateful for your time.”

“Almost over now.”

The Marquis nodded. He *would* miss this when it was gone.

But even Kings of Forever end.

And with a bow, Jean-François went to see his mother.

VI

UNRAVELING

MARGOT, EMPRESS OF Wolves and Men, was reading.

Jean-François stood in his mother's rooms, hands clasped behind him, staring from a tall window out into the storm. The Empress's chambers stood atop a tall tower, commanding an eagle's view of Sul Adair, but the mighty keep below was yet difficult to see. Snows fell relentless, thunder shaking the gables high above his head. And though dusk was already nearing, in truth this day could not end quick enough.

Empress Margot stood surrounded, a small legion of maidservants helping the great Priori of the Shepherds dress. Half a dozen were weaving her immaculate braids with glittering jewels. Six more were binding the stays of her magnificent gown, a trio of beauties adorning the Empress's fingers and throat with gold.

But Margot herself was reading.

Swift as the wings of a hummingbird, she turned one page of Jean-François's history after another, pausing occasionally to admire his artful sketches. As she reached the death of the Forever King, Jean-François heard his mother sigh, and he wondered if she were yet displeased with him. But at the closing of the final page, Jean-François found himself elated as his mother turned to him and slowly inclined her head.

"Well done, Jean-François. Well done indeed."

"It is not the key you hoped for," he ventured. "There is no secret hidden in the story of the Grail that we may use to bend the knee of the Priorem."

"On the contrary, Marquis, it is *precisely* the tool we need. That the Voss squandered their legions along with their First is noteworthy. That they sought to create highbloods without sharing that knowledge with the other lines is cause for further distrust. And that their greatest suffered an end so ignominious lessens them in all our eyes." Margot glanced to her boudoir—the bloody sheets being stripped from her bed. "The Draigann hath proved himself compliant to our desires. And Kariim hath quarrel territorial with the Ironhearts aready. If not by this eve's entertainments, the Spider can be swayed to our side by the knowledge thou hast gleaned."

Margot's lip curled softly.

"For all her venom, Kestrel is *weak*."

Turning, the Empress of Wolves and Men walked slow across her chamber, maids following. She stood a foot shorter than the Marquis, yet ever Jean-François felt a child in her shadow. But as she gazed up at him, her painted lips curled in a small smile.

"Thou hast pleased me."

She cupped his cheek, black eyes gleaming.

"My son."

"It gives me greatest joy to hear it, Mother."

"Yet thou hast the air of a maid in mourning?"

Jean-François glanced to his history on the Empress's dresser.

"The tale was long in the telling. Perhaps I am simply tired, but I confess, it has … touched somewhat me, Empress."

"You feel something for him. For them."

"As would all who read their story, surely?"

"The wolf frets not for the ills of the worm, Marquis."

Jean-François bowed his head.

"Her Grace speaks wisdom, always."

"Thou art *so* young, Jean-François," she sighed. "And in sooth, I adore thee for that frailty. But fret not, love. All affection for Gabriel de León shall soon fade, I assure thee. Last impressions linger longest, and not the death of a lion shall he die, but a dog."

Margot glanced to the hourglass on her armoire.

"Speaking of, shouldst thou not be about preparations? The murder of so great and noble a hero warrants a change of attire, surely? T'would not do to be late."

Margot turned back to her servants, lifting a hand yet unadorned by gold.

"Until the execution, Marquis."

"My Empress."

With a bow, Jean-François retreated from his mother's chambers, never showing his back. In the corridor outside, faithful Dario awaited, hands clasped, eyes downturned.

"What news, love?" Jean-François asked.

“The Lion is returned to his cell, Master. But more of the Empress’s men arrived almost as soon as we locked him in.”

“Preparing him for his end, I suppose.”

“Will you attend, Master?”

Jean-François sucked his bottom lip, thoughtful.

“Come,” he finally said. “Dress me.”

The pair made their way through the royal wing, past portraits Jean-François had painted, down grand and winding stairs and through the vast halls of Sul Adair. Though the sun had not yet fallen, he could hear soft voices, swift footsteps, beating wings that told him Margot’s court had already begun to rise. The execution of the greatest hero of the realm and the last child of the greatest line of monsters this world ever knew had the château in quiet uproar, and already, Jean-François could see fledglings making their way through the shadowed halls, scurrying like rats lest they miss the best vantage.

“Oh! Beauty.”

The words were pillow soft and poison sweet, sending a thrill along Jean-François’s skin. Looking behind him, he found Kariim, Priori of the Ilon, gazing at him with a tiny smile on dark, lush lips. He was newly stepped from a grand bedchamber, wreathed in the perfume of fresh blood. Dark braids adorned with gold tumbled over shoulders as broad as heaven. His frockcoat was likewise gold, crushed velvet, that golden serpent with opal eyes fixed in his white silk cravat.

“What delight,” the Spider smiled, “to gaze ’pon thee again.”

A soft chuckle dragged Jean-François’s eyes to the figure on the Spider’s arm.

“*Have a care, sweet Kariim,*” Kestrel warned. “*Press much harder and thou shalt have this gormless whelp in love with thee.*”

“Wouldn’t that be just *terrible*.”

A cold smile curled Kestrel’s lips, but no hint of it reached her eyes as she stared Jean-François down. The Iron Maiden stood at the Spider’s side, pale arm linked through his. Kestrel wore no armor tonight, clad instead in a silken dress, black as the hair flowing over her bare shoulders. The gown’s cut was perilous, plunging low and hugging tight, and despite its chill, Jean-François was forced to concede the Priori’s dark beauty.

“Dame Kestrel.” He bowed, swallowing. “Lord Kariim. A pleasure, as always.”

“Not so much as it might have been,” the Spider sighed. “But there is always tonight, young Marquis. Prithee, are thy duties for thy fair and noble dam concluded?”

Jean-François’s belly rolled, his senses totally overcome as the Priori Ilon wove his silken webs. But the pain in his nethers lingered, his tongue gone dry as dust.

"They are concluded, my lord, but—"

"*Come, Kariim.*" Kestrel's gaze was black ice as she slipped deeper onto the Spider's arm. "*Sunlight fades, and the hour of de León's fall draws near. Half twelve of kinsmen and a king besides hath I lost to the teeth of that dog and his wretched sister. Not all the blood in empire would I trade to belay witness to one second of their suffering.*"

Jean-François bowed his head, murmuring.

"My condolences, Dame Kestrel. For the murder of your kin and king besides."

"*Not commiseration my desire, little Shepherd. But retribution.*"

Kestrel tightened her grip on the Priori Ilon.

"*Come.*"

Kariim winked at Jean-François, allowing himself to be led away on the Maiden's arm. Jean-François turned, headed toward the stairs leading up to his chambers, stopping so suddenly Dario bumped into his back.

"… Master?" the boy whispered.

"Dame Kestrel?"

The Maiden paused, turning with one eyebrow arched in cold question.

"Forgive me, Priori. But … what you said just now…" Jean-François wet his lips, swallowing thickly. "*Half twelve of kinsmen*? I suppose technically Gabriel de León only *helped* Dior Lachance kill Prince Danton, but—"

"*Brother Danton's blood stains the Lion's hands and his sister's both, as surely as doth sister Morgane's.* Six, *my siblings slain by their efforts entwined.*"

"… Then you do not weigh Celene responsible for the death of Patience?"

"*Patience hath reached its end, surely. But* thou *art its assassin, little Shepherd.*"

"I speak of Patience de León, Priori."

Kestrel blinked. "*Patience de León perished with her slattern mother in a squalid lighthouse off the coast of Alethe. Punishment due for my dear sister Laure.*"

"Oui, but afterward…"

The Iron Maiden looked at the historian as if he were moonstruck.

"*Afterward? Her pretty head did my father tear from her body, and her virgin blood did he feed unto the ground. Four years hath she rotted in the arms of cold earth, little Shepherd. Of what* afterward *speak ye, if not a feast for worms?*"

"I…"

"*Patience de León is* dead."

Bells began tolling, echoing in the great rafters above—the grim parody of a cathedral calling the faithful to mass. With a soft scoff, the Iron Maiden dismissed the historian, striding now toward the execution with the Spider on her arm, her steps quickening lest she miss a moment of the Black Lion's torment.

Head swimming, thoughts racing, Jean-François ascended to his chambers. Slamming the door at his back, the vampire began stalking back and forth in the dark.

"Master?" Dario asked. "Should I dress—"

"Shut up," he snapped, raising his hand. "Just shut *up,* let me think…"

Jean-François continued pacing, his mind a tempest now. His hands were knotted into fists behind him, boots ringing upon cold stone. Dario touched the chymical globe on his desk, throwing dim light into the boudoir, shadows stretching out beneath him. The mice in the glass terrarium squeaked, little Marcel and Davide furious at being woken.

A pale moth flew from some dark corner, circling the globe.

"Master, what's wrong?" Dario whispered.

"He lied."

The historian shook his head, snarling.

"Don't you *see*? De León *lied* to me!"

"Perhaps the chevalier was mistaken…"

"*Mistaken?"* Jean-François bellowed, whirling on the lad. "Mistaken about his only daughter being kith and not a corpse? Are you *crazed,* boy?"

That pale moth ascended, circling now about the frightened lad's head.

Jean-François dragged one hand through his hair, fear roiling in his belly.

He'd swallowed it.

God help him, he'd swallowed it all.

And worse, he'd repeated it to his Empress.

"I believed him," he hissed. "I *pitied* him. The trembling, the tears, Almighty *God…"*

He stopped then, whispering.

"If he'd lie about his own daughter … what *else* did he lie about?"

"He was drinking a lot. Perhaps—"

Furious now, the historian flashed across the room, slamming Dario into the wall.

"He *deceived us,* you bloody fool! You heard Kestrel. Patience de León died four years ago! The Forever King tore her fucking head off right in front of him; how many oceans of wine would her *father* have to drink to forget *that*?"

Dario gritted his teeth, making no reply. Again that pale moth battered the boy's cheek, almost insistent now. And snarling, the historian snatched and crushed it in his palm.

"No, d—"

Dario flinched, biting on his tongue rather than crying out. Jean-François let the remnants fall, brushing the dust of ruined wings from his palm as his eyes narrowed.

"It's only a moth, boy."

"… It was pretty."

The thrall smiled weakly, caressing the vampire's cheek.

“I *like* pretty things.”

Dario leaned in, lips brushing against Jean-François’s, but the historian pulled away.

Thoughts roiling.

Mind racing.

A moth.

A white *moth.*

Battering upon the chymical globe in de León’s cell.

The same breed that had been circling the globe in the Liathe’s dungeon.

The same breed?

Jean-François blinked.

Or the same moth*?*

No, no, de León had crushed a white moth in his cell, the night we first spoke.

But … could that have been for show?

He pictured the creature now, beating fragile wings ceaselessly on the glass while he and the silversaint and the Liathe spoke. Tracing those futile courses over and over …

But had *they been futile?*

Or … had it been tracing out messages one painstaking letter at a time, just as the Liathe had done in the dungeons of Dún Maergenn upon the skin of …

“Lachance.”

White moth.

White wolf.

“*Lachance,*” he hissed again.

He looked at Dario, the boy swallowing thickly.

“Master?”

“Where did you say Nicolette found you?”

“On the road to Sūdhaem, Master. After she departed Talhost.”

Jean-François stepped forward, pushing the thrall back against the wall. The boy’s eyes were stone, his face a mask; but this close, Dario couldn’t quite hide the thunder of his pulse, the scent of his sweat rising soft on that smooth, warm skin.

Jean-François’s lips peeled back from his fangs.

“*You’re* lying, too.”

The boy broke, sudden, savage, kicking the vampire in the chest and sending him back into the desk. The terrarium shattered, glass and mice flying as the thrall drew a familiar silversteel dagger from his boot.

And with a snarl, “Dario” lunged at the historian’s chest.

Jean-François was no warrior, no veteran of battles hard fought and won. And though Dario had seemed the softest, sweetest lad, the vampire saw in him now a rage boundless. He cried out as the silversteel dagger sank into his chest, but a few inches from his heart. And snarling, he slapped the boy away.

"Stop," he spat. "Your master comm—"

Dario was on his feet in a blinking, blade raised in his fist. Jean-François couldn't understand—the boy had drunk his blood every night for weeks, he *should* be thralled a dozen times over. And yet, he flew across the bedchamber with murder in his eyes …

The pair met, the knife sinking into Jean-François's shoulder. Crashing to the floor, the historian flailed, desperate, gasping as his claws sliced Dario's beautiful face from chin to brow. Blood sprayed, the boy cursed, twisting the knife in Jean-François's flesh.

"Stop this!"

Cursing, hissing, the historian fought, finally seizing the lad's wrists and forcing them to the stone.

"Stop it! Stop, I *command* you!"

Dario laughed, spat a mouthful of blood into Jean-François's face.

"Fuck you. *Master.*"

Jean-François scowled as the boy flailed, realization slowly sinking home.

Any who'd supped of her blood was immune to thralldom.

And the historian understood then. Who this boy truly served.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Nobody's dog, *leech.*"

Jean-François blinked, cold fear in his belly.

"Joaquin Marenn…"

He clenched his jaw, the tapestry unraveling, bloody sweat rising on his skin as he seized the boy's throat.

"What *is* this?" he demanded. "What is happening here?"

"*By the blood of the Five was it done. By the blood of the Five shall it be undone.*"

"… What?"

The boy sneered, hissing through bloody teeth.

"You should have learned Rousseau, leech."

VII

EXECUTION

YOU REMEMBER MY chess lesson from Cairnhaem? The Rousseau Gambit?

Of course. Draw your foes out of position by feigning weakness. Then, strike.

You almost killed *me.*

But I didn't. I spared *you. And while you're figuring out why …*

Maybe my wisdom hasn't been totally wasted on you, vampire.

The cup is broken. The Grail is gone.

Every breath Celene steals is drawn only to lie.

Gabriel's greatest love has never been liquor, nor licentiousness. It is lying.

Flattery will get you everywhere.

Do you ever wonder where this ends, Chastain?

It could not have been easy to lure those flies into her web.

One wonders what bait the Empress used.

Who the fuck *told you I was a hero?*

A clever lion feigns weakness to draw out his prey.

And while you're figuring out why …

By the blood of the Five was it done.

By the blood of the Five shall it be undone.

You know all this is a waste of time, don't you?

A clever lion.

The blood of the Five.

While you're figuring out why …

SHARP.

AS.

THREE.

SWORDS.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS RAN, FRANTIC, blood dripping from his hands. His memory was ringing with Gabriel's testimony, Celene's story, every word and gesture and moment they'd shared these last few nights cast in a new and ghastly light. A picture was forming in his head now; a dreadful portrait, almost too awful to consider.

My God …

Oh, sweet merciful God in heaven …

He could hear the roar of the crowd as he approached, sprinting swift as he was able. The thrallswords on guard barely saw him coming, just managing to open the great double doors as he flung himself onto the stage set for the Lion's execution.

A grand room, vast and circular and thronged with cold bodies. Decades past, this had been the great chapel of Sul Adair, its once holy ground long since profaned by Margot's court. The blood-red light of gathering dusk spilled through towering windows of beautiful stained glass depicting scenes from the pages of the Testaments. The concentric rings of stone seats—once peopled by faithful pilgrims in feastdays past—were now thronged with Margot's brood and dignitaries of the three visiting bloodlines. A hundred or more of the empire's finest highbloods, the cream of vampiric society, hoisting brimming goblets of blood as they roared in red delight. Great banners were hung from the gables, embroidered with the twin wolves and twin moons of Blood Chastain. And upon a golden throne, surrounded by her four black wolves and the Priorem of Voss, Ilon, and Dyvok, sat Margot Chastain, Undying Empress of Wolves and Men.

Jean-François shouted warning, *roaring* to his dam, but his voice was lost amid the hue and cry of the blood-drunk mob. In the heart of the great chapel, where once the altar and statue of the Redeemer must have stood, a great circle had been cleared. Every eye in the room was fixed upon it, mortal and kith alike, utterly enthralled.

The Empress Margot had promised a spectacle for the ages, and the historian could see she'd delivered. Who could imagine a contest more legendary than this?

A pair who wanted to kill each other more?

The Last Silversaint versus the Last Liathe.

Gabriel had been stripped to his britches, that muscled torso and silver ink on full and glorious display. The fresh scars on his face lent him a ferocious scowl, and the loss of his eye hadn't dulled his skill. His skin was sheened with sweat, long black hair whipping through air behind him as he lunged across the circle. Celene wore her leathers and tattered frockcoat of crimson and gold, her face a pale and perfect mask. She moved with studied grace, slicing between the sands of the hourglass, black gaze locked on her brother.

The pair crashed against each other, there in the heart of the baying crowd. Gabriel was armed with a longblade of silver, Celene her blade of blood. The ankles of both were fettered—de León's with thrice-bound steel and the Liathe's with silver, their chains threaded through rings drilled into the flagstones at their feet. The slack they'd been given to move with wasn't much; all the better to force them into murderous proximity. Jean-François watched as Celene's blade skimmed but a hair from her brother's throat, and her follow-through clipped his forearm. The crowd bellowed as the 'saint's blood flew, spattering the faces of a few ecstatic fledglings in the front row.

"Mother!"

Jean-François roared again, drowned by the clamor and cry as de León blooded his sister in return. The historian pushed through the mob, skirting the edges of the crowd, waving for attention and shouting for his Empress again.

"MOTHER!"

Castia glanced in the direction of his cries.

Black eyes narrowed as she looked toward de León.

"*MOTHER!*"

Gabriel closed on his sister, fangs gritted as he reached into his britches, and Jean-François's belly dropped as he saw a small metallic object now pressed to the sevenstar on the silversaint's palm. The pair collided, blades locked, hitting the ground together in a spray of spit and blood. The crowd howled as the siblings fell to, brawling like children, the Draigann bellowing for the Lion's blood, golden fangs agleam. But Jean-François saw his mother frowning in his direction now, the crowd seething about him as he pushed through the crush toward her. Beside the Empress, Kariim the Spider brushed away a small shape flitting about his cheek, Jean-François's belly rolling as he saw …

White moth.

Oh, Almighty God …

Bells split the air, sudden and booming above the roar of the mob. The Lion and Liathe were yet rolling about on the floor, but the crowd slowly stilled as that ironsong rang on the circular walls, echoed in the gables above. Breathless thrallswords in Chastain livery burst through the duskdoors, and now that the clamor within was dimming, above the bells tolling still, Jean-François heard a distant, terrified cry without.

"*ALARM!*"

The historian looked skyward, cursing. In the bloody light of the falling dusk, he could see the air above the execution floor was alive now—*filled* with the wings of hundreds, *thousands* of those cursed moths. The Empress was on her feet, her wolves growling as she looked toward her son, shouting his name in question. Kestrel was likewise standing, fangs bared as she glanced to the Spider. But Kariim was whispering softly, black eyes fixed above as those moths began descending.

The Priori of Whispers hadn't read Jean-François's history—he likely had no *idea* what he was seeing. But Jean-François understood perfectly, roaring at the top of his lungs as those tiny white shapes began swarming, swirling about the heart of the hall.

"It's *Lachance*!"

"Empress, we're under attack!"

Margot tore her eyes from her son to the breathless thrall before her.

"Attack? What madness be this? Sul Adair be impregnable, boy!"

"Your Grace, they came in through the slopway—"

"*Treachery,*" Kestrel hissed, glowering at Margot. "*Thy Courtesy false, Margot?*"

"Silence thy tongue," she spat. "And you, speak! Who dares march 'pon Sul Adair?"

The thrall drew breath to reply, but Jean-François already knew the answer. His mouth ran dry as dust as beyond the uproar of those booming bells, the drumbeat of running boots, the song of unsheathed steel, he heard it cutting the dusk like knives.

The song of Highland pipes.

He understood now. Why de León had been so keen to know when the Voss and Ilon parties would arrive. And why, oh sweet and merciful God in heaven, *why* he'd spun such a tale for the ages. A tale of battles not won and daughters not dead and sisters not loved.

He'd been playing for time.

His eyes found the silversaint's across the room; grey as the ocean before a storm.

But the storm was *here* now, God help them.

Gabriel and Celene were on their feet, the silversaint letting the key in his hands fall with the shackles from his ankles. Jean-François snarled, cursing young Joaquin Marenn for this final treachery as he saw Castia was likewise freed. But any rage for the boy faded at the sight of those pale moths. Descending now, spinning in an ever-tightening spiral, the air filled with the hum of their wings as they blurred, whirled, coalesced into a pale and hulking form, stood beside the Lion and Liathe in that hall's raging heart.

A wolf.

White of fur and blue of eyes.

"Heaven's huntress," Jean-François breathed.

The hall was in uproar; booming bells, shouting vampires, ringing footsteps, bellowing thralls, and beneath it all, turning Jean-François's belly to water, the rising song of those dreadful pipes. The Draigann bellowing warning as he recognized the song, Margot snarling at her messenger, Kariim rising to his feet. Kestrel stood like stone, disbelief etched in her eyes as she stared at that great wolf and breathed in soft horror.

"*Lachance.*"

But the first amid that chaos to actually *move* were Margot's wolves.

The sight of that great beast in their midst had driven Fealty and Malice to fury, the pair bounding down from Margot's throne with Valor and Prudence close behind. But though de León and Castia both moved to intercept, that white she-wolf didn't flinch.

Instead, she bared her throat, allowing Margot's wolves to lunge. Time seemed to grind almost still, all the world falling into awful slow motion, Jean-François lifting one hand and roaring at the top of his lungs as Fealty flew like a spear, as Malice cut like a blade, biting down on that white wolf's fur and tearing open her flesh.

Blood.

BLOOD.

Fifty years had Jean-François lived upon this earth, and in that time, he'd lost count of the throats he'd opened. Victims of every shade and shape, no taboo too outlandish, no desire too profane. But never once in his whole life had he inhaled a perfume so *wondrous*. Gabriel's sword found Malice's heart, Celene's blade took Fealty's head, but Jean-François almost didn't notice the wolves falling, every sense aflame, every inch of him *alive* as the scent, God, that glorious *scent* gripped him by the throat.

Kneel, it cried.

Pray.

But despite that siren song, fear of what must come next drove the Marquis not to kneel, but *dive,* down behind the pews and across the flagstones. As the silversaint held out his blade. As the Last Liathe burst into a storm of red wings and flooded up into the air. As that she-wolf, torn at throat and shoulder, lowered her head and began shaking herself like some soggy, flea-struck hound.

Her blood flew, spraying across the room, droplets sparkling like tumbling rubies as the great wolf shook herself head to tail.

And where those rubies fell, vampires *burned.*

Fire. Screams. Chaos. The hall erupted, burning kith flinging themselves into their fellows and setting yet more aflame. And through that inferno, the great she-wolf lunged. About her head, a ring of bloody needles was now arrayed; a deadly halo circling an angel's brow. Those blades of blood flew, spraying among the courtiers of the Blood Chastain, the dignitaries of Voss, Ilon, Dyvok, fire raging among that forest of Dead flesh. And bounding up to that golden throne, falling upon that Undying Empress of Wolves and Men, the great beast snapped her mighty jaws closed, and tore off Margot's head.

Jean-François roared, agony and grief and terror all entwined. A burning body crashed onto the flagstones beside him—some Dyvok mediae screaming and thrashing as he burst into ashes. A Chastain courtier exploded above him, showering him with her embers as he cried out again. Black smoke scored the air, cinders falling like rain, bells ringing, pipes singing, men and kith shrieking.

Jean-François scrambled to his feet, gasping, terrified, catching a glimpse from the corner of his eye as that bastard wolf set the Iron Maiden's flesh ablaze with a salvo of bloody needles. The last Prince of Forever shrieked in immortal terror, her body become a living, flailing torch. De León was carving through the burning court like a hot blade through snow, and Jean-François saw the Liathe had re-formed far across the hall now, cutting down fleeing courtiers as a scythe to wheat. The Marquis tripped, fell backward, cracking his skull on a bloodstained pew. Dragging golden curls from his face, he staggered upright in time to witness Kariim the Spider bursting into ashes in that she-wolf's awful jaws.

She'd slain his mother. Butchered his kin. And as the beast seized the Draigann in her jaws and began shaking him like some screaming, flailing rag doll, Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain, Historian of Her Grace Margot Chastain, First and Last of Her Name, Undying Empress of Wolves and Men, did what any vampire in his place would have done.

He *ran*.

Bursting through the duskdoors, almost falling in his haste, smeared in ashes and blood, he fled. The halls of Sul Adair were in uproar, cadres of thralled soldiers in dark steel charging toward the outer walls to the tune of those crashing bells. He could hear the din of battle above the song of the vicious storm outside; men screaming, beasts roaring, his belly rolling as he caught a whispered *shuffshuffshuff!*

Dashing up the stairs to the château's first tier, he sprinted past the beautiful frescoes toward a balcony's tall bay doors. And from that vantage, he began to comprehend the full horror of what was happening here.

De León had mocked his lack of understanding about castles, and the historian would freely admit he *was* something of a novice when it came to the intricacies of siege warfare. But even a babe such as he was aware that one's defense could be safely described as less than triumphant if your enemies were *inside your fucking walls*.

Sul Adair was allegedly impregnable; four rings of battlements, four baileys, each more heavily fortified than the last. But staring down from the balcony, he could see the innermost courtyard had already been breached. Dark figures were moving in the snow, soldiers fighting across the walls, lit by a sky full of burning arrows. Beneath the song of those cursed pipes, Jean-François could hear a rhythmic *booming,* at first mistaken for the storm. But squinting harder, he realized thunder rang in the bailey below, not the skies above—a sleek blond figure in a long greatcoat swinging a sword as big as a man. He flung himself about the courtyard, dragged by the weapon's weight, and split all before him asunder; Jean-François finally recognized the deadly steps of the Dyvok Anyja.

“Aaron de Coste…” he breathed.

A glow caught his eye, ghostly and burning on the highwalk—another figure slicing his way toward the gatehouse. Though the storm was bitter chill, he yet fought bare-chested, the silver on his skin gleaming as he cut through thrallswords like a scythe.

Your Grace, they came in through the slopway …

“Lachlan á Craeg.”

The gate’s crossbar split apart under de Coste’s mighty blade. And through that breach, a *monster* came. Its fur was midnight, daubed with a pattern of white moons, and its teeth were swords, sharp enough to rend steel. It reared up before the terrified thralls, a ten-foot tower, and its mouth split open in a blood-chilling ROAR.

A bear.

Bear-*kin.*

Brynne á Killaech.

The monster flung herself through the breach, cutting armored knights into pieces and drenching the snows blood-red. In her wake poured a multitude now, Jean-François whispering an awestruck curse. They were a motley of men and women and beasts and all between—warriors with the heads of wolves and great cats with teeth like knives, clancloth of every shade. In their midst strode a tall woman, eyes streaked with blood, braids of summer flame gilded with gold. She raised a hand tipped with wicked talons, tail lashing side to side as she pointed toward the château main.

“*FER THE GODLING!*”

“Phoebe á Dúnnsair.”

Jean-François staggered backward from the windows, the depths of the Last Silversaint’s deceit fully unveiled.

The *Last* Silversaint?

Oh, God, he’d even lied about that, *hadn’t he?*

As the army of the Moonsthrone poured through the gates of Sul Adair, as the screams of his dying kin rang in the gables, as the flaming arrows fell and thunder rolled and silver burned, the stink of gore and char and ash and shit rising up to choke him, the awful horror of battle laid bleeding and bare …

“God help me,” he breathed.

Jean-François fled. Away from those awful sights, that horrid stench, that cacophonous song, through the château’s halls. His only thought was to hide now—deep and dark as he could. Through vast corridors he ran, past priceless frescoes and goldglass chandeliers, sweating blood and whispering prayers until he reached a set of huge ironbound doors, wrought with the likeness of Mahné and Phaedra.

The twin angels of Death and Fear regarded him mutely as he fled between them, down into the catacombs beneath Sul Adair. The historian knew these labyrinths well now, but there were few others who did, and praying those few would be too busy butchering the cream of vampiric society to notice one missing historian, off through the dark halls he ran. Down into the deepest hole, the darkest pit in his late mother's former empire.

The Last Liathe's old cell.

Reaching those great stone doors, he stole swiftly inside. And summoning the verminshape, he burst apart; dozens of black rats scattering into every dark nook and cranny. Thunder boomed faint above, screams echoing soft on cold stone. And down in Sul Adair's bowels, the pieces of the Marquis Jean-François of the Blood Chastain hid.

Night stretched on, the song of battle raging faintly overhead, even the air down here in the depths now tinged by the brilliant perfume of blood. God only knew how much was being spilled overhead. *Oceans,* by the scent. But after what seemed an endless forever, untold hours come and gone, the battlesong grew fainter. Softer.

Then ceased entirely.

Dozens of sets of whiskers twitched, pieces of the Marquis nosing the air.

Uncertain.

Fearful.

How long had he been down here now? Hours? A day? He dare not leave, not without knowing it was safe. But nor could he cower down here forever.

His mind was racing, again thinking of de León, the depths of his deception entwined hand in hand with his sister's. They'd spun their web masterfully, feeding him enough truth to hide the lies secreted between; grains of shit hid in bags of sugar. The song they'd played had been an intoxicating one, full of enough blood and smut and tragedy that he'd been blinded to the sprinkling of tiny inconsistencies, now glaring and oh, so bloody obvious. They'd fooled him, sure and true. His ancien mother beside him. And all the while, they'd been guided by that cursed moth, that hateful little *cunt.* God in Heaven what wouldn't he do to get his hands around her fucking th—

Footsteps.

Softly ringing on cold stone.

No.

No, they couldn't have …

The steps drew closer—a multitude—the pieces of the Marquis hunkered down in shadow, praying with a fervor that would have shamed all seven Martyrs.

Pass me by.

Oh sweet Redeemer, I shall give up this life of sin, I beg you. Only let them pass m—

The doors opened, heavy stone grinding in the dark. A silhouette stood framed in the flickering glow of burning torches, more shadows gathered behind, the perfume of fresh gore not enough to hide their scent beneath.

"You're sure he's down here?"

Gabriel …

"I saw him fleeing with my own eyes, Chevalier."

Oh, God. Nicolette …

Boots scraped on cold stone, the lead figure stepping into the room.

"Heeeeeeere, coldblood."

Gabriel whistled, slapping his thigh.

"Come on, boy," he sang. "Come out now."

The historian's tiny forms remained motionless, terror filling them to brimming.

"I don't want to kill you, Jean-François," Gabriel called. "But if you make me come in there and hunt you down piece by fucking piece, I'll end you smiling."

Another figure stepped in beside the silversaint, calling into the dark.

"If we wanted you dead, you would be ashes already, sinner."

Celene's voice rang on the stone, bloody blade poised in her hand. And though there are none who fear dying more than those who live forever, though he'd no guarantee save the vow of the greatest liars he'd ever met …

What choice did he have?

The pieces of him slunk from the darkness, shivering, quivering. And by the power of his will and with a soft prayer on his lips, Jean-François took shape once more.

"*Good* dog," the silversaint smiled.

The historian sat naked in the heart of the cell, black river at his back. De León loomed above him, his sister at his side. They'd taken time to wash after the massacre above, but both were still drenched in the scent of blood. He could feel the Liathe's gaze burning at the edges of his eyes. But the historian looked only at Gabriel.

He was clad in black leathers, a shirt of black velvet, the ties loose-laced at his throat. Even with the new scars the Empress had gifted him, the missing eye, his face was familiar, but the expression was … odd. *Unnerving,* even. It was as if another person entire was wearing the silversaint's skin. They'd shared moments of animosity, camaraderie, even intimacy, but looking up into that storm-grey eye, the historian was horrified to realize …

I don't know this man at all.

Across Gabriel's fingers, atop his hands, silver ink glinted in the torchlight. Jean-François licked his lips, swallowed hard.

"Why do they not glow?" he whispered. "If Lachance isn't dead, your belief in her never perished. Why does your aegis not still burn, Gabriel?"

"Hasn't burned since Astrid and Patience. Some things just stay dead, vampire."

"But … fighting Danton on the Mère … your faith was rekindled—"

"I lied about that," Gabriel sighed. "Probably the first big one I told you."

"It was a suitably dramatic moment," Celene murmured. "Though I thought the ink glowing red rather than silver was laying it on a little thick, brother mine."

"I needed him to think I was special." Gabriel sank to his haunches, eye-to-eye with Jean-François. "I needed him to *like* me. Harder to think the worst of a man you like."

The historian shook his head. "But … why lie about your daughter?"

"I figured pity could buy me what affection couldn't."

Gabriel shrugged.

"Time."

"I saw de Coste up there," Jean-François said. "Lachlan and Phoebe too."

"Feign weakness. Draw your opponent out of position. Then strike."

"Is there anything you *didn't* lie to me about?"

Gabriel rubbed his chin, rough fingertips scraping sharp stubble. "I was mostly honest, Historian. The bitterest deceits are easier to swallow when hidden among honeyed truths. But most of my friends made it through, if that's what you're asking."

Jean-François chewed his lip, bloody tears in his eyes.

"*Why?"*

"Why?"

Gabriel shook his head, utterly bewildered.

"Look at the fucking world you made, vampire."

"But why all *this*?" he whispered. "This grand ruse?"

Gabriel breathed deep, his tone growing just a touch sadder.

"You're not a total fool, Jean-François. You asked the right question in the end. You should've pressed me harder when I told you it didn't matter anymore."

The historian frowned, searching his memory until finally …

"What did Morgane say to you before she died?"

"*By the blood of the Five was it done*," Celene replied.

Gabriel nodded. "*And by the blood of the Five shall it be undone*."

Jean-François blinked. "You mean to undo…?"

"The Forever King's grand work. Oui."

The silversaint looked skyward then, shaking his head.

"For all its horror, all its terrible legacy, the death of days began simply enough. The blood of the eldest of each line, spilled in ritual by a servant of hell's black hand. Margot, Tolyev, Ilon—all were lickspittles of the Pit. And with silver tongue and promise of darkness eternal, Fabién convinced each to give their blood to his unholy cause."

"But the Esani…"

"Our eldest's blood had already been spilled," Celene replied. "When Voss slew Illia in Charbourg. By the blood of those first Five was his curse wrought. The earth torn asunder. The skies run to pitch. But *to* that blood was the curse yet bound."

"Spill the blood." Gabriel shrugged. "Break the curse."

"*Margot,*" Jean-François breathed. "All this … to murder Margot…?"

"And the eldest of the other lines. It wasn't like Morgane and I had much time to chat before Voss killed her. So I fashioned a way to bring the Priorem together and clip the lot of them, just in case."

"You didn't kill Lachance in the Charbourg."

Gabriel fixed the historian with a withering stare. "Hardly."

"And with de Coste and Lachlan and Phoebe all fighting beside you, the battle against the Forever King would not have cost you anywhere near as much."

"Ash gave her life for it, just as I said. Fabién Voss died *hard.*"

The silversaint clenched his jaw, steel in his eye.

"But he still fucking died."

"We fashioned our plan in the aftermath," Celene said. "Dior would journey south to the Moonsthrone with Phoebe. And there, the Princess of Low and High would finally raise her army as prophecy foretold. Lachlan and Charlotte headed to León for reinforcements with Aaron and Baptiste. But we needed a reason for the Priorem of the other bloodlines to gather."

Gabriel smiled. "That's where your niece came in."

Jean-François looked past the silversaint, lips curled. The Viscontessa Nicolette stood behind the Liathe, clad in yet another of her fabulous gowns. Little Henri was clutched to her bosom, her gaze downturned as she murmured.

"I'm so sorry, uncle."

"Treacherous *whore…"*

"Fault her not, Marquis," Celene said. "The blood makes slaves of the hardest heart. Is that not so, Viscontessa?"

"That is so." Nicolette inclined her head. "Mistress."

Jean-François's belly rolled, teeth aching as he clenched his jaw.

"Nicolette sent word on the wind to her Empress of the Grail's death," Gabriel said. "Our capture. But we trekked south only slowly. Dior needed time to master her gifts among her kin. For the armies of the Highlands and León to march to Sūdhaem. But once word of Margot's great convocation had spread, once Dior and the Highlanders were on their way, the good Viscontessa finally handed us over to the great Empress of Wolves and Men."

"The perfect plan," Jean-François hissed.

"Hardly," Celene scoffed. "This storm covered our armies while they marched, but it slowed them to a *crawl*. Everything we had worked for was almost undone. We had to stall for days before they were finally in position."

"Hence you attacking me the night we first spoke." The historian glowered at the silversaint. “Hence your useless escape attempt. You were stalling.”

“It was a close thing in the end. But I always had faith Dior would come through.”

Gabriel smiled sadly, rising to his feet.

“I just needed patience.”

Jean-François swallowed as Gabriel’s hand shifted to his blade.

“So that’s it, then? Time to butcher me?”

Celene scoffed. “You think you deserve to live?”

“God knows I am no angel, mademoiselle, but—”

“You are a sadist. A degenerate. An unrepentant murderer of *countless* innocents.”

“Perhaps.” Jean-François stared up at Gabriel, voice trembling in fear now. “But *you* are a murderer of innocents also, de León. Oh, you may not have drunk Lachance, but what about poor little Odette in León, eh? That nameless soldier boy on the road to San Maxi—”

“There *was* no boy, Jean-François. And Mlle Odette is a sixty-two-year-old grandmother of twelve. I didn’t touch a hair on her sweet grey bonce.”

“You … lied about the sangirè?”

“No.” Gabriel shook his head, bloodshot eye narrowing. “No, the thirst is very real. A sickness that will always be part of me. But Dior’s blood…”

“… It heals the sick.”

“Not forever.” Gabriel smiled sadly. “But who wants forever?”

Jean-François lifted his chin, bloody tears spilling down his cheeks.

“*I* do.”

“Where is Joaquin, sinner?”

The historian bit his lip, staring up into the Liathe’s face. He could see the legion behind her eyes, staring at him with nothing close to pity as Gabriel growled.

“What did you do to that boy, coldblood?”

“I…”

He looked to Nicolette, desperate.

“I d-did not mean it, I swear!”

“Uncle, I—”

Celene turned, spinning like a dancer, and in one fell blow, cleaved Nicolette’s head clean off her shoulders. Blood sprayed across Jean-François’s face as the Viscontessa’s body crumbled to the floor, his shriek of terror became a squeak as the silversaint’s hand closed about his throat. He could feel the awful heat in Gabriel’s palm, his blood already beginning to boil in his veins, his voice ripped up and out of his throat in a desperate, terrified wail.

“*P-please,* I don’t deserve this! If not for me, none of this would have been possible! An unwilling catspaw, oui, but I was your catspaw nonetheless!”

He grasped the silversaint's wrist, chocolat eyes pleading.

"You *owe* me, mon ami. *Please!"*

The Liathe narrowed her eyes.

Gabriel glanced toward his sister.

And growling, he dragged the historian off the floor and hurled him across the room.

The pain was astonishing—like crashing face-first through a wall of burning bricks. Jean-François felt as if he were being flayed alive, flesh stripped from his screaming bones. He crashed down onto slick stone, frockcoat torn, skin ripped bloody, almost blinded by the agony of it. But rolling onto his hands and knees, lungs filled with the scent of lamp oil, he realized at last where the silversaint had hurled him.

Across the river.

"No," he whispered.

Staggering to his feet, drooling blood, he screamed louder.

"*NO!"*

Gabriel stood now in the doorway, spattered in fresh blood. Nicolette's headless corpse was splayed upon the cold stone, her dog cradled in Celene's arms as she stepped over the threshold and out of the cell. Gabriel turned to follow, Jean-François staggering toward the riverbank, forced back at the water's edge by burning invisible hands.

"You can't leave me down here, de León! You can't *do* this to me!"

"You said you wanted forever, coldblood."

The door slammed closed.

The lock snapped shut.

The dark echoed with the 'saint's parting words.

"Use it wisely."

DAWN

IT WAS THE twenty-seventh year of daysdeath in the realm of the Forever King, and his murderer was still waiting to die.

The killer stood for the last time at a thin window, staring toward the sunrise. Tattooed hands were clasped at his back, stained with blood new and old; princes and empresses and kings. His room stood high in the reaches of a broken tower, battered by a tempest that had swept the world. The door behind him was no longer locked like a secret.

Nor his heart, besides.

From his vantage, the killer studied the figures below, his eye the grey of the storm above. Wild pipes ringing on the wind and fires blazing in the bitterbleak tempest, brave warriors scattering the flagstones with the ashes of fiends who'd called this fortress home. Their coming had been a harbinger, shaking the world like no earthly thunder could, and their arrival marked the end of an era. A reign of monsters. The death of days.

"Ye ready?"

He turned at her voice, already smiling before he saw her in the doorway, hair lit the color of summer flame. Phoebe stared at him with golden eyes, a song of scars upon her skin. But it seemed now that song wasn't one of hurt, but triumph; every drop of blood she'd given, every wound she'd suffered carving her into the woman he adored.

"You're beautiful," he sighed.

"Yer lucky," she growled.

She meant lucky to be alive, of course. Even now, he could see the fear she'd felt to let him walk into this monster's den without her. But as she slipped to his side and kissed his lips, sweet and warm and soft, he took her in his arms and breathed into her hair.

"I am."

"Come now," she murmured, meeting his gaze. "Stop yer mopin', man. We've miles an' months to the Moonsthrone, and sooner we leave, sooner we arrive."

"It's strange."

He sighed, looking upon the room one last time. The old lambswool rug covering the bloodstains. The hearth bereft of flame. Two antique armchairs, arranged around a little table where his tale had begun, *years* ago it seemed now. They'd tried to make it comfortable, though the silversaint knew this prison for what it was. And yet …

"I'll miss this place."

"I won't."

Phoebe squeezed his hand.

"Come. She'll be waiting."

Arm about her waist, he let himself be led down the winding stair and away from the scene of his crimes. The perfume of blood hung over the halls below like smoke, and it seemed Sul Adair and her wondrous frescoes still echoed with the songs of battle and screams. Gabriel shook his head, eye closed for a moment, wondering if he'd ever truly be rid of them. Phoebe squeezed him tight, leading him out into the courtyard, and the scent of blood was swept away by the kiss of bright mountain winds. But he looked to the sky then; the sun yet dark, the heavens still heavy as his twice-broken heart.

"Ye look like thirty miles of rough road, old man."

He smiled as Lachlan strode across the snow-clad bailey, caught him in a crushing hug. As his old 'prentice lifted him up and squeezed the breath from his lungs, he sighed.

"I feel it, youngblood."

Lachie set him down and raised a brow to Phoebe, who simply scoffed.

"He's sulking. He dinnae like to win. Nothin' to complain about."

He smacked her backside, scowling. "Leave me be, woman."

She smacked him back, eyes afire as she kissed him, tail wrapping about his thigh.

"*Never.*"

"Ye headed back to the Moonsthrone with the others?" Lachlan asked.

"Oui," Gabriel nodded, breathing deep. "Long walk ahead. Best get started."

"If I might tempt ye into a detour…" Lachlan scratched the back of his scalp, abashed. "My betrothed formally requests the pleasure of yer company, Chevalier."

"Pleasure?" Phoebe scoffed. "She has *met* him, hasn't she?"

Gabriel scowled. “And what would the Baronne de León have of me?”

“Our babe’s due soon,” Lachlan replied. “As like to be born as not by time I get back to the City of Lions.”

“I know what you gave up to be here, brother.” Gabriel squeezed his shoulder. “You’ve my thanks eternal, and the world’s besides.”

Lachlan waved off the gratitude, meeting Gabriel’s eye as he sighed.

“Charli’s asked ye be godfather to the bairn.”

“*God*father?” Gabriel blinked. “*Me?*”

“I told her ye’d nae be interested.” Lachie shrugged. “She told *me* to ask.”

Gabriel breathed deep, turning his face to the sky once more. Like the sun above, a shadow yet hung on him, heavy and cold. He suspected his wounds would never fully be healed; that some pieces of him would simply always be missing. But looking to Phoebe at his side, he was reminded of her words again—that no man was whole alone. That we are not made broken, but born broken. Yet if we’re blessed, if we’re brave, we might find those few whose edges fit against our own. Like pieces of the same puzzle, or shards of the same shattered blade. Those people who, in their own broken way, made our broken edge complete.

So he met his old ’prentice’s eyes.

And he nodded.

He was still fighting for breath in Lachlan’s hug when a familiar voice spoke behind.

“Careful, á Craeg. You’re roaring loud enough to wake the dead.”

“God, let’s hope not,” said another.

Lachlan set Gabriel down, looking the newcomers over with twinkling eyes.

“Good to see ye, wanker,” he smiled. “Nicely fought.”

“And you, wee squire,” Aaron replied. “To be sure.”

The pair embraced, laughing, and Baptiste threw his big arms around them both. Phoebe pawed a tear from her eye as Gabriel joined in, barely able to fit them all in his embrace. He was a man who’d slain a King of Forever. Liberated nations. Carved his name into the pages of living history with his own silvered hands. And still he wondered in that moment what the *hell* he’d done to deserve friends like these.

He wiped his cheeks upon his sleeve, sniffing thick.

“Will you ride with us to Moonsthrone?” he asked.

Baptiste chewed his lip, glanced toward his husband. “Well, actually…”

“We thought we might stay here, Gabriel,” Aaron said.

Gabriel’s heart sank at that, but Baptiste stepped into the breach.

“Sūdhaem is my homeland,” he said. “But Aaron’s never really seen it. And anything we had in Nordlund is gone, so … we thought we might start again here, Gabe. Build it up, as we did with Aveléne. There are no others left alive to keep this place going. All things have their end, but it seems a shame to let such beauty fade without a fight."

Aaron took his husband's hand and kissed it. And though Gabriel knew Baptiste spoke not of castles then, he yet found himself smiling, looking around these halls his brothers could make a home.

"The Lords of Sul Adair," he said. "Has a nice ring to it."

"So it does."

All turned at that voice, and Gabriel felt his heart bursting into fire. She stood atop the château steps in the long shadows thrown by the strangled sun, but still she shone like angels. Long white hair blowing in the breeze, eyes blue as long-lost skies, cheeks pinked by biting winds. She seemed the very image of Michon reborn, leading her faithful into victory. A girl who'd commanded armies. Conquered empires. The Red Hand of God. But to him, she was as she'd ever been—a symbol of all that was still good and bright in this world.

The girl who'd saved him.

She came down the stairs and threw her arms about him.

"Dior," he breathed.

"Papa," she sighed.

"It's good to see you, love."

"I missed you."

"I know. I'm sorry I had to leave."

"You came back."

"Always."

She pulled slow from his embrace, looking up into his eye, touching the new scars in his cheek with her wounded hand. He could see the hurt in her—the hurt for *him*—that she'd not been able to fix it. But in truth, all of them had their scars now. And in the end, none of those wounds had been enough to end their story.

"I'm aright," he told her. "I'll be aright."

"You sure?"

"Sweet Mothermaid, leave him be, love."

Dior chuckled, turning to the château doors. "You're not the queen of me."

Reyne á Maergenn descended the steps in a tabard of emerald green, mismatched gaze sparkling. Catching her beloved up in her arms, she kissed her brow, her eyes, her lips.

"You can't fix everything, Dior," she chided.

"I can try," the girl replied.

They kissed again, softer and sweeter, safe in each other's arms. Their severing, one more ruse to buy pity and favor and time. One more beautiful, tragic lie in a story brimming with them. But Aaron looked to the heavens then, his voice a heartsick whisper.

"And yet, after all that…"

Gabriel’s smile fell, and like his brother, he looked again to the sky. They’d risked so much. Fought so hard. Lost almost everything. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting—some burst of brightness or grand thunderclap or the hand of God himself reaching down to part that blackened veil across his heavens. And yet, even with Margot dead, the eldest of the other lines torn to pieces, still that darkness lingered above.

He wondered if this had been some final deception on Morgane’s part, scoffing to himself at the bitter irony. To have lied so completely to stage this game, to win this hand, only to have been bluffed off the pot at the last.

What a joke that would be.

And then …

“Gabriel!”

The cry echoed across the bailey, the sound of quick footfalls echoing on snow-clad stone. He looked up to the battlements and saw his sister sprinting across the highwalk, swift as winter winds. As he watched, Celene leapt from the ramparts, a blur of crimson and midnight blue, landing in the snow like a feather fallen. Without pause she was up and running, black eyes wide, roaring again.

“GABRIEL!”

“Celene…?”

“*GABRIEL!”*

She near collided with him as she arrived, her brother dragging her to halt, Dior looking at her with fear in her pale blue eyes.

“Celene, what’s—”

“Look! *Watch!”*

Dragging her sleeve up to her elbow, Celene thrust her hand toward the sky. The shadows in the bailey were long, but the strangled sun was yet creeping higher, the anaemic glow bleeding faint through the cover of the clouds. And standing tall as she could, Celene’s hand brushed against that cusp of daysdeath light.

Nothing happened.

Nothing changed.

Lachlan looked to Aaron, Reyne to Dior, a frown darkening Gabriel’s brow.

“Celene, what the f—”

“Wait,” she hissed. “*Wait.*”

And so they did, glancing among themselves, wind moaning through the jagged crags around them. The moment stretched on toward forever, the silence grown heavy as silvered steel. And just when all patience was lost, when Gabriel’s temper finally rose up in his throat and rebuke boiled behind his teeth …

“Fuck,” Phoebe whispered.

“My,” Dior sighed.

"*Face,*" Gabriel breathed.

He squinted, not daring to believe even after all this, gaze fixed on Celene's pale hand held up into the worthless sunlight. But from her flesh immortal, he could see it now, whispering in wonder as tiny wisps of it rose up off her skin.

"Smoke…"

"The sun," Dior breathed. "It's brighter."

His sister met his eye, bloody tears in her lashes.

"It begins," she whispered. "The *end.*"

"Great Redeemer," Baptiste whispered, signing the wheel.

Silence lasted a moment longer, shocked and bewildered still. But Lachlan then cried out, something between a shout and strangled sob. With a roar, he grabbed Aaron in a headlock, bellowing as he caught Gabriel up with his free arm. The ice of disbelief was cracking now, the sweet warmth of reality sinking home, a fire lighting up in Gabriel's belly and gleaming in Phoebe's eyes. All about him, folk were embracing, weeping, *bawling,* Baptiste standing with arms spread as he howled at the sky, Reyne sinking to her knees, face upturned to the heavens as the tears spilled down her cheeks.

Gabriel took hold of his sister's shoulders, looking into her eyes, gasping for breath, heart like thunder, *still* not daring to believe. With a cry, Celene threw herself upon him, almost crushing his ribs for her embrace, kissing his cheeks and meeting his gaze.

"*We did it,*" they both said.

Dior crashed upon them, crying, *roaring,* all the hurt, all the sacrifice, all the miles, lies, blood, loss made worth it one thousand times over. Gabriel held her tight, grabbing Phoebe, Aaron, anyone close, not enough arms for the joy in his heart.

God Almighty, they'd done *it …*

Celene was gazing at him, bloody tears in her eyes. He could see the uncertainty there, a faintest trace of fear in the dawn. But with a smile, he enfolded his baby sister in his arms, standing between her and the sun rising. He knew not what might become of her in these new and brighter days. But he knew they'd face it together.

Ever outnumbered. Never outmatched.

"I thought…"

Lachlan shook his head, staring skyward in bewilderment.

"I've nae idea *what* I was expecting. Some clap of thunder or…"

Gabriel smiled, meeting Dior's eyes.

"Hand of God."

"It makes a kind of sense," Aaron said, Baptiste in his arms. "For twenty-seven years that darkness spewed into the skies of Talhost. All that poison will not simply disappear in a single day. Time must pass for hurts to heal."

"But they will," Gabriel replied. "All hurts do."

Dior smiled at Reyne. “And tomorrow will be brighter still.”

Gabriel felt them then, felt them *both*; the part of his angels that would never die. He sensed a phantom weight in his empty scabbard, a silver song in his head. *Live For Me*. And he whispered, the words his love gifted him so long ago. The truth that bound them still.

“Hearts only bruise. They never break.”

He kissed Phoebe’s brow, holding her tight as tears spilled down his cheeks. Dior wrapped arms about them both, Reyne now joining her in that circle of warmth, as close to home as he could know. Dior looked toward the sun, voice soft as smoke.

“How long do you think it will take?”

“I’m not sure,” he replied.

The sky above was not quite so dark as sin.

The horizon, not quite as red as his lady’s lips the last time he kissed her.

Gabriel ran one thumb across his fingers, the letters inked below his knuckles.

“But I have patience.”

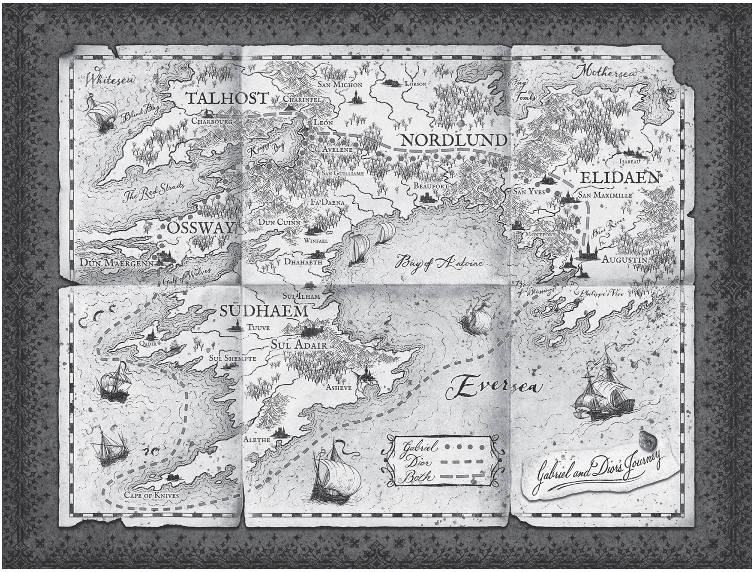
THE END

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks and bloody kisses to the following:

Pete, Jen, George, Andrew, Lisa, Anne Marie, Claire, Tim, Stephen, Hector, Young, and all at St. Martin's Press; Natasha, Frankie, Nosfleuratu, Catherine, Chloe, Emily, Robyn, Claire, Sian, Vicky, Elinor, Rosie, Ruth, Holly, Fionnuala, Sarah, and all at HarperVoyager UK; Michael, Thomas, and all at HarperCollins Australia; the amazing Marco, Andy, and all my foreign publishers— especially Sami for the French lessons!; Gonzalooooooo, Bonbonatron, Jason, Kerby, Micaela, Virginia, Orrsome, Cat, LT, Tom, Josh, Tracey, Anna, Toves, Emily, Vova, Alix, Ally, Tiffany, Clarissa, Andrea, Mara, Daphne, Avery, Taylor, Bill, George, Anne, Stephen, Ray, Robin, China, William, Christopher, George, Pat, Anne, Nic, Cary, Neil, Amie, Anthony, Joe, John, Laini, Mark, Steve, Stewart, Tim, Chris, Marc, Beej, Rafe, Weez, Paris, Jim, Ludovico, Mark, Randy, Vessel, Elliot, CJ, Will, Pete (RIP), Tom (RIP), Dan, Sam, Marcus, Chris, Winston, Matt, Robb, Oli, Noah, Philip, Robert, Maynard, Ronnie, Corey, Courtney, Chris (RIP), Anthony, Lochie, Ian, Briton, Trent, Phil, Sam (RIP), Logan, Tony, Kath, Kylie, Nicole, Kurt, Jack, Max, Poppy; my readers for the boundless love, my enemies for the ever-increasing sales; the baristas of Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, Brisbane, London, Bath, Canterbury, Nottingham, Edinburgh, Dublin, Paris, Plainville, New York, Chicago, Dallas, San Diego, Portland, Seattle, Barcelona, Praha, Roma, Milano, Venezia, and most importantly Toledo. Finally and especially, Amanda.

Without you, nothing.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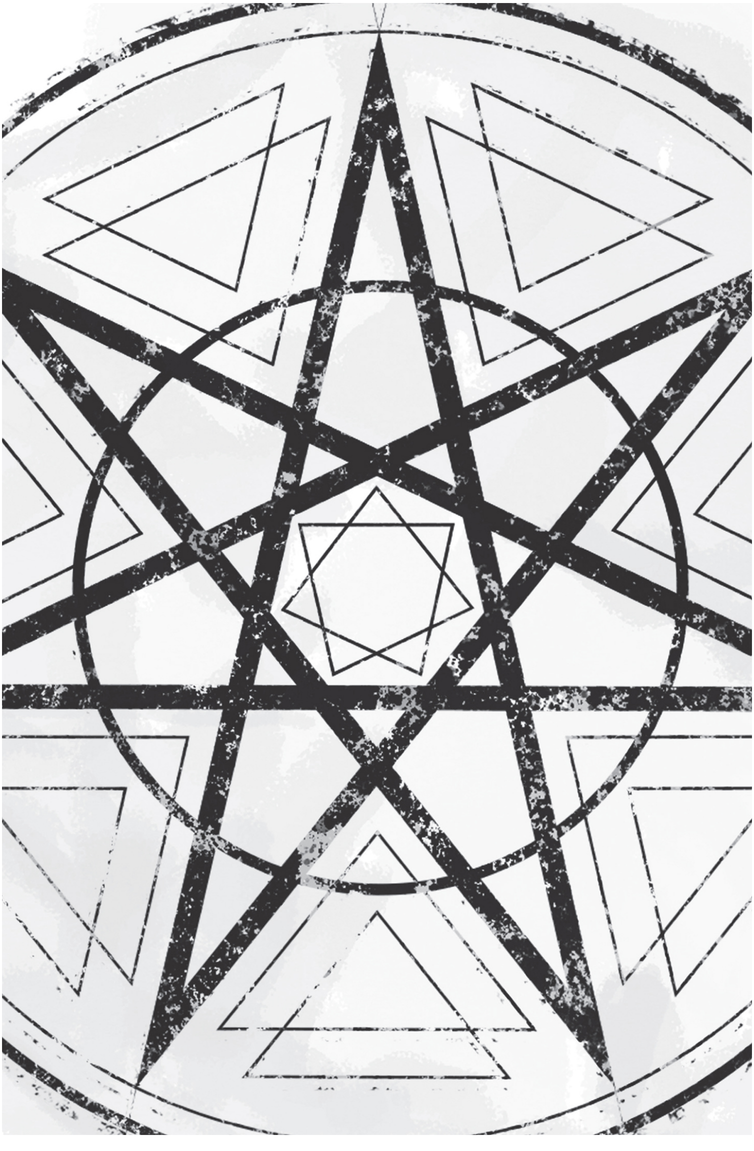

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Jay Kristoff is a #1 international *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of fantasy and science fiction. He is the winner of eight Aurealis Awards and an Australian Book Industry Award, has more than two million books in print, and is published in more than thirty-five countries, most of which he has never visited. He is as surprised about all this as you are. He is 6'7" and has approximately 10,000 days to live. He does not believe in happy endings.

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Acknowledgments
Also by Jay Kristoff
About the Author
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First published in the United States by St. Martin's Press, an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

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For information, address St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.stmartins.com

Interior illustrations by Gonzalo Mendiverry

Additional design by Bon Orthwick

Sevenstar logo design by James Orr

Maps by Virginia Allyn

Cover design by Young Jin Lim

Cover illustration by Jason Chan

Cover typography by Meg Morley

eISBN 9781250245380

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First Edition: 2025